'FOR PERCIVAL'

THIRD VOLUME

'FOR PERCIVAL'

BY

MARGARET VELEY

IN THREE VOLUMES

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OF

THE THIRD VOLUME.

'FOR PERCIVAL.'

CHAPTER I.

BERTIE AT THE ORGAN.

BERTIE was duly called, and came down the next morning, punctually enough, but somewhat weary and pale. A slight headache was supposed to account for his looks. Lydia complained of the same thing over her breakfast of bacon downstairs. But Fate was partial, for Bertie's marble pallor and the faint shadow beneath his eyes were utterly unlike poor Lydia's dull complexion and heavy, red-rimmed eyelids. She was conscious of this injustice, and felt in a dim way that she had proved herself capable of one of those acts of self-devotion, which are the more admirable that they are sure not to be admired. But the

longer she thought of it, the more she felt that this noble deed was not one to be repeated. One must set bounds to one's heroism. 'I can't go on losing my beauty sleep in this fashion,' said Lydia to herself, 'I do look such a horrid fright the next day.'

When Judith had gone to Standon Square, Bertie yawned, stretched himself, got out his little writing-case, and sat down to write a letter. He spent some time over it, erasing and interlining, balancing himself on two legs of his chair, while he looked for stray words on the ceiling, or murmured occasional sentences to judge of the effect. At last it was finished, and, being copied in a dashing hand, looked very spontaneous indeed. 'I think that ought to do it,' he said to himself, as he smoked his pipe, glancing over the pages. 'I think it *will* do it.' He smiled in the pride of triumphant authorship, but presently there came a line between his brows, and a puzzled expression to his face. 'I'll be shot if I know how it is to be managed afterwards. People do it—but how? I wonder if Thorne knows. If law is at all catching, a year of that musty office must have given him a touch of it.' Lisle considered the matter for a few minutes, and then shrugged his shoulders. 'It won't do, I'm afraid. I daren't try him. I'm never

quite clear how much he sees and understands, nor what he would do. And Gordon? —no.' There was another reverie. Finally, he arose, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and stretched himself once more. 'I've got to depend on myself, it seems to me. I must set my wits to work and astonish them all. But oh, if yawning were but a lucrative employment, how easily I could make money, and be quit of the whole affair!'

Bertie took a great interest in his personal appearance, and was frank and unaffected in his consciousness of his good looks. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the bottle-green mirror, and stopped short in considerable anxiety. 'Brain-work and these late hours don't suit me,' he said. 'Good heavens! I look quite careworn! Well, it may pass for the effect of a gradually breaking heart—why not?'

A glance at his watch roused him to sudden activity. He carefully burnt every scrap of his original manuscript, feeling sure that Lydia would read his letter if she had the chance. He looked leniently on this little weakness of hers. 'Very happy to afford you what little amusement I can in the general way,' he soliloquised, as he directed an envelope; 'but I really can't allow you to

read this letter, Lydia, my dear.' Apparently he was in a distrustful mood, for after hesitating a moment he got some wax, and sealed it with a ring he wore. Then, putting it carefully in his pocket, he tossed a few sheets of blotted music paper on the table, left his writing-case wide open, took his hat and a roll of music, and went out in the direction of St. Sylvester's, trying to work out his problem as he walked. He was not, however, so deep in thought that he had no eyes for the passers-by, and his attention was suddenly attracted by a servant-girl dawdling along the opposite pavement. He watched her keenly, but furtively, as if to make sure, and when she turned down a side street, he followed, and speedily overtook her.

'This is lucky!' he ejaculated. 'I didn't expect to see you, Susan. What are you doing here?'

She was a slight, plain girl, with a fairly intelligent face, whose expression was doubtful. Sometimes it showed a willingness to please, oftener it was sullen, now and then merely thoughtful. Just at this moment, as she looked up at the young organist it was crafty and greedy. 'I'm taking a note,' she

said. 'Miss Crawford's always a sending me with notes or something.'

'You don't mind being sent with notes, do you?' said Bertie, blandly.

'That's as may be,' the girl answered.

'I should have thought it was pleasant work. At any rate, it's as easy to take two as one, isn't it?'

'I have to take 'em 'cause I'm paid to, you see—easy or not.'

'Oh, of course, you ought to be paid.' His fingers were in his waistcoat pocket, and some coins that chinked agreeably were transferred to her hand, together with the sealed letter. You've saved me a walk to Standon Square,' he said.

The girl laughed, looking down at her money. 'It wouldn't have hurt you, I dare say. You oughtn't to make much of a walk there. How about an answer?'

'Oh, I shall get an answer when I come to-morrow.' He nodded a careless farewell, and went a little out of his way to avoid Gordon's brother, who was visible in the distance.

Susan turned the missive over in her hand. 'It's sealed tight enough,' she remarked to herself. 'What did he want to do that for?

She eyed it discontentedly. 'I hate such suspicious ways. Wouldn't there be a flare up if I just handed it over to the old maid! I won't, though, for she's give me warning, and he's a deal more free with his money than she'd ever be—stingy old cat! But wouldn't there be a flare up! My!' And Susan, who had an ungratified taste for the sensational, looked at the address and smiled to think of the power she possessed.

Before she slipped the letter into her pocket she sniffed doubtfully at the envelope, and tossed her head in scorn. 'I thought so! Smells of tobacco!' It was true, for Lisle, as we know, had smoked while he revised his composition. 'If I were a young man going a courting, I'd scent my letters with rose or something nice, and I'd write 'em on pink paper—I would!' Susan reflected. But Lisle was wiser. There is no perfume, for a young ladies' school, like a whiff of cigar smoke. To that prim, half convent-life seclusion, where manners are being formed, and the proprieties are strictly observed, it comes as a pleasant suggestion of something worldly and masculine, just a little wicked, and altogether delightful.

So Lisle went on his way to St. Sylvester's,

lighter of heart for having met Susan, and got rid of the letter. While it was still in his pocket nothing was absolutely settled, in spite of that half-crown which had represented inexorable destiny the night before. But now that it was gone, further thought about it was happily unnecessary, and honour forbade him to draw back. It was true, however, that he was still face to face with the difficulty which had been in his mind when he met his messenger so conveniently.

He caught a street Arab, and promised him twopence, if he would come and blow for him while he practised. But he began by playing absently and carelessly, for, since the letter had been despatched, his problem had become infinitely more urgent, and it thrust itself between him and the music. His fingers roved dreamily over the keys, his eyes wandered, as if in spite of himself, to the east end of the church. All at once he came out with an impatient 'How *do* people manage it?' and he finished the muttered question with a strong word, and a big chord.

A moment more, and his face is illuminated with the inward light of a sudden idea. He lets his hands lie where they happen to be, he sits there with parted lips and startled

eyes. The idea is almost too wonderful, too simple, too obvious, and yet—'By Jove!' says Bertie, under his breath.

His street Arab means to earn his twopence, and in spite of the silence he pumps away in a cheerful and conscientious manner, till he shall be bidden to stop. The organ protests, in a long and dolorous note, and startles the musician from his reverie. Forthwith he begins to play a stirring march, and the rejoicing chords arise, and rush, and crowd beneath his fingers. Has he indeed found the solution of his great perplexity? Apparently he thinks so. He seems absolutely hurried along in triumph on these waves of jubilant harmony. A ray of pale March sunlight falls on his forehead and shines on his hair, as he tosses his head in the quickening excitement of the moment. His headache is gone, his weariness is gone. The notes seem to gather like bands of armed men, and rush victoriously through the aisles. But, even as he plays, he laughs to himself, a boyish happy laugh, for this great idea which is to help him out of all his difficulties is not only a great idea, but a great joke. And the march rings louder yet, for, with every note he plays, his thought grows clearer to his mind, plain and more feasible. There is a

gay audacity about the laugh which lingers in Bertie's eyes, and on his lips, as if Dan Cupid himself had just been there, whispering some choice scheme of roguish knavery, some artful artlessness, into the young man's ear. Bertie does not acknowledge that his inspiration has come in such a questionable fashion. He says to himself, 'It will do, I feel it will do—isn't it providential! Just when I was in despair!' This is a more suitable sentiment for an organist, no doubt, for what possible business can Dan Cupid have at St. Sylvester's? Louder and louder yet pours the great stream of music, and that is a joke too, for Lisle feels as if he were shouting his secret to the four winds, and yet keeping it locked in his inmost soul, taking the passers-by into his confidence in the most open-hearted fashion, and laughing at them in his sleeve. But the musician is exhausted at last, and the end comes with a thundering crash of chords.

'Here, boy, here's sixpence for you; you may be off. We've done enough for to-day, and may go home to Bellevue Street.' But it seems to Bertie Lisle, as he picks up his roll of music and comes down the aisle, that Bellevue Street too is only a joke now.

CHAPTER II.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY.

April had come, and the best of the year was beginning with a yellow down of daffodils. The trees stood stern and wintry, but there were little leaves on the honeysuckles and the hawthorn hedges, glad outbursts of song among the branches, and soft, shy caresses in the air. Sissy Langton, riding into Fordborough, was delicately beautiful as spring itself. She missed her squire of an earlier April, and his absence made an underlying sadness in her radiant eyes, which had the April charm. That day her glance and smile had an especial brightness, partly because spring had come, and, though countless springs have passed away, each comes with the old yet ever fresh assurance that it will make all things new. Partly because it was her birthday, and, while we are yet young, there is a certain joy of royalty which marks our birthday mornings. But most of all because that day gave her the power to satisfy

a desire which had lain hidden in her heart through the long winter months.

It was the Fordborough market-day, and already, though it was but eleven o'clock, the little town was waking up. Sissy, followed by Mrs. Middleton's staid servant, rode straight to the principal street, and stopped at Mr. Hardwicke's office. Young Hardwicke, reading the paper in his room, was surprised when a clerk announced that Miss Langton was at the door, asking for his father. He forgot the sporting intelligence in an instant. 'Well, isn't my father in?'

'No, Mr. Hardwicke went out about twenty minutes earlier, and did not say when he should be back. They had told Miss Langton, and she said, 'Perhaps Mr. Henry——'

Mr. Henry was off like a shot. He found Sissy on her horse at the door, looking pensively along the street, as if she were studying the effect of dusky red on palest blue—chimney-pots against the April sky.

'So Mr. Hardwicke is out?' she said, when they had shaken hands. 'I'm so sorry. I wanted him so particularly.'

'Is it important? Are you in a great hurry?' said Henry. 'He won't be long, or he would certainly have left word, on a mar-

ket-day especially. Could you come in and wait a little while?' he suggested. 'I suppose I shouldn't do as well?'

'I don't know,' said Sissy, looking a little doubtfully at the tall fresh-coloured young fellow, who smiled frankly in reply.

'Oh, it isn't at all likely,' said Mr. Henry, with delightful candour. 'The governor can't, for the life of him, understand how I make so many blunders. I've a special talent that way, I suppose, but I don't know how I came by it.'

'Then perhaps it had better be Mr. Hardwicke. If it were a waltz, now——' and she laughed. 'But it isn't a waltz, it is something very important. Do you know anything about wills?'

He looked up in sudden apprehension. 'Is it about a will? Mrs. Middleton's? Is anything the matter?'

'No; it isn't Aunt Middleton's. It's mine,' was the composed reply. But seeing relief, and almost amusement, on his face, she added hastily, 'I *can* make a will, can't I? I'm twenty-one, you know. It's my birthday to-day.'

'Then I wish you many happy returns of the day.'

'Thank you; but can I make my will?'

'Of course you can make a will.'

'A will that will be good,' Sissy insisted, still speaking in the low tone she had adopted when she began to explain the object of her visit. 'Can I make it here and now?'

'Not on horseback, I think,' said Hardwicke, with a smile. 'You would be tired of sitting here while we took down all your instructions. It isn't very quick work making ladies' wills. They generally leave no end of legacies. I suppose they are so good, they don't forget anybody.'

'Mine won't be like that. Mine will be very short,' Sissy said. 'And I suppose I am not good, for I shall forget almost everybody in it.' She laughed as she said it, yet something in her voice struck Hardwicke as curiously earnest. 'I will come in, I think, and tell you about it,' she went on. 'I want to make it to-day.'

'To-day!' he repeated, as he helped her to dismount.

'Yes. I'll tell you,' said Sissy, entering his room, 'and you'll tell Mr. Hardwicke, won't you? I'll get the Elliotts to give me some luncheon, and then I can come here again between two and three. I shall have to sign it, or something, shan't I? Do tell your father, I want it all to be finished to-day.'

'I'll tell him.'

'Tell him it's my birthday, so of course I must do just as I please, and have everything I want, to-day. I don't know whether that's the law, but I'm sure it ought to be.'

'Of course it ought to be,' Henry replied, with fervour. 'And I think I can undertake to say that it shall be our law, anyhow.'

'Thank you,' said Sissy. 'I shall be so very glad. And it can't take long. I only want him to say that I wish all that I have to go to Percival Thorne.'

'To Percival,' Hardwicke repeated, with a sensation as if she had suddenly stabbed him. 'To Percival Thorne. Yes. Is that all I am to say?'

'That's all. I want it all to be for Percival Thorne, to do just what he likes with it. That can't take long, surely.'

Hardwicke bit the end of a penholder that he had picked up, and looked uneasily at her. 'You're awfully anxious to get this done, Miss Langton—you aren't ill, are you?'

'Oh, I'm well enough, much better than I was last year,' said Sissy, lightly. 'But there's no good in putting things of this sort off, you know'—she dropped her voice—'as poor Mr. Thorne did. And your father said once, that if I didn't make a will when I came of age, my money would all go to Sir Charles

Langton. He doesn't really want any more, I should think, for they say he is very rich. And he is only a second cousin of mine, and I have never seen him. It's funny, having so few relations, isn't it?'

'Very,' said Hardwicke.

'And some people have such a lot,' said Sissy, thoughtfully. 'But I always feel as if the Thornes were my relations.'

'I suppose so. At any rate, I don't see that Sir Charles Langton has any claim upon you.' There was silence for a minute, Sissy drawing an imaginary outline on Hardwicke's carpet with her riding-whip, he following her every movement with his eyes.

'I shall have to sign both my Christian names, I suppose?' she said, abruptly.

'Have you two? I didn't know. What is the other?'

'Jane.'

'Jane—I like that,' said Henry. 'Yes, sign them both.'

'Thank you. I don't want to seem like an idiot to your father. I should like it best if I could just write "Sissy," and nothing else, as I do at the end of my letters. When I see "Cecilia Jane Langton," I feel inclined to call out, "This is none of I!" like the old woman.'

She stood up to go. 'You won't forget, will you!'

'No, I won't forget.'

'Everything to Percival Thorne.'

'Percival Thorne is an uncommonly lucky fellow,' said the young man, looking down.

Sissy stopped short, glanced at him, and coloured. In her anxiety she had never considered the light in which the bequest might strike Henry Hardwicke. In fact, she had not thought of him at all, except as a messenger. She was accustomed to take him for granted on any occasion. She had known him all her life, and he was always, in her eyes, the big friendly boy, with whom she pulled crackers, and played blindman's buff, at children's parties. She dreamed of no possible romance with Henry, and did not imagine that he could have such a dream about her. He was as harmless as a brother, without a brother's right to question and criticise. It was precisely that feeling which had been at the root of the friendliness which the Fordborough gossips took for a flirtation. They could not have been more utterly mistaken. She liked Henry Hardwicke; she knew that he was honest, and honourable, and good; but if any one had said that he was a worthy young man, I believe she would have assented. And that is the last adjective which a girl would apply to her ideal.

Sissy's scheme had been in her mind through all the winter, but she had always imagined herself stating her intentions, in a business-like way, to old Mr. Hardwicke, who was a friend of the family. She had been so thunderstruck when she found that he was out, that she had taken Henry into her confidence at a moment's warning. She dared not risk any delay. It would be impossible to go home, leaving Percival's future insecure. Suppose she died that night—and she was struck with the fantastic coincidence of Mr. Hardwicke's second absence at the critical moment—suppose she felt herself dying, and knew that the only thing she could have done for Percival was left undone! She could not face the possibility of that agony. Indeed, she wondered how she had lived through the long hours which had elapsed, since the clock struck twelve, and the day began which made her twenty-one; not the girl Sissy any longer, but the woman who held Percival's fortune in her hands. How could she have gone away with her purpose unfulfilled?

When Henry said 'Percival Thorne is an uncommonly lucky fellow,' she coloured, but only that transient flush betrayed her, for she answered readily.

'Why, Mr. Hardwicke, what a dreadful

thing to say to me! I hope you don't have second sight, or anything horrible of that sort?'

'Second sight,' Henry repeated doubtfully, looking down at a little dangling eye-glass, 'what's that?'

'Oh, you must know! Isn't it second sight when you can tell if people are going to die? You see them in their winding-sheets, and they are low down if it will only be rather soon. But if it is to be quite directly, their shrouds are wrapped round them, high up. What was mine like, that you said Percival Thorne was so lucky? Up to here?' And, standing before him, she smiled, and touched her chin.

'God forbid!' said Henry. 'How can you say such fearful things?'

'Oh! you didn't see it then? I'm very glad.'

'Good heavens—no! And I don't believe it. I didn't mean that Thorne would be lucky if you *died*!'

'I can't do him any good any other way,' said Sissy, with sweet composure; 'but I don't think I am going to die, so I don't suppose I shall do him any good at all. Do you think this is a strange fancy of mine? The truth is, Aunt Middleton and I have been unhappy about Percival ever since last May, because we know his grandfather meant to have done something for him. He isn't rich, and he ought to have had Brackenhill, so I should

like him to have my money if I die. It is only a chance, because I daresay I may live fifty years or so—only fancy!—but I would rather Percival had the chance than Sir Charles. That's all. You'll explain it to your father? It can't do any harm, if it does no good.'

'Oh, no; I see. It can't do any harm.'

'And now I'll be off,' laughed Sissy. 'How dreadfully I have made you waste your time! I daresay if I hadn't been here, you would have written ever so many things on parchment, and tied them up with red tape.'

'Oh yes, quantities!' Hardwicke replied, as he escorted her to the door. 'A cart-load at least. I'm glad you think I'm so industrious.'

Standing outside, he said something about her horse. He did not like Firefly's look, and he told her so. Moreover, he threatened to tell Mrs. Middleton his bad opinion of Sissy's favourite.

'Nonsense!' she answered lightly. 'There's nothing to be afraid of.' But suddenly she turned and looked at him. 'Don't you really think Firefly is safe?' she said. 'Well, I must see about it. William, I'm not going back now, and I think I'll walk to Mrs. Elliott's. You had better meet me here at half-past two.'

And with a parting glance at Hardwicke, she went away down the sunshiny street, and he stood looking after her. He would have liked to be her escort to the Elliotts' house, but he had her message to deliver to his father, and he knew she would not permit it. Besides, to tell the truth, she had taken him by surprise, and gone away before he thought of anything of the kind. So he could only stand bareheaded on the office steps, watching her as she went on her way. But suddenly his lips parted to let out a word, which certainly would not have escaped him had he been by Sissy's side.

'There's that Fothergill fellow!' said Henry, recognising the Captain's slim figure, and black moustache. And he turned on his heel, and went in.

He was quite right. It was Fothergill who came sauntering along the pavement, looking at the shop windows, at the passers-by, at the preparations for the market, with quick eyes and an interest which conveyed the impression of his superiority to it all, better than any affectation of languid indifference. His glances seemed to say, 'And this is a country town—a market—these are farmers—people live here all their lives!' But when he saw Sissy Langton, he came

forward eagerly. And perhaps it was just as well that he was at hand to be her squire through the busy little street, for the girl was seized with a new and unaccountable nervousness. A bit of orange-peel, lying in the road, caused her a sudden tremor. Two or three meek and wondering cows, gazing vacantly round in search of their familiar pasture, appeared to her as a herd of savage brutes. She looked distrustfully up and down the road, and waited at the pavement's edge for a donkey-cart to pass, before she dared attempt a crossing. It was just at this moment that the Captain appeared, quickening his pace, and lifting his hat; only too ready to guard her through all the perils of a Fordborough market-day.

Henry Hardwicke hated reading, and had no particular love for the law. His father said he was a fool, and was inordinately fond of him, nevertheless. It might be that the old lawyer was right on both points. And, dull as Henry was supposed to be, he was capable of delicate feelings and perceptions, as far as Sissy Langton was concerned. It seemed to him that accident had revealed to him a hidden wound in her heart; and the revelation pained him, not selfishly, for he had never hoped for himself, but because of

the secret suffering which it implied. His one idea was to do her bidding, yet not betray her. He delivered her message to his father, with a tact of which he was himself unconscious. On his lips it became no less urgent, but he dwelt especially on Sissy's desire to see justice done to the man who had been accidentally disinherited; on her feeling that she owed more to the Thornes, whose home and love she had shared, than to the Langtons, with whom she shared nothing but a name; and on her impatience of even an hour's delay, because the Squire's sudden death had made a deep impression on her mind.

All this, translated into Harry's blunt and simple speech, was intelligible enough to Mr. Hardwicke. The girlish whim that all should be done on her birthday made him smile; but the remembrance of Godfrey Thorne was present in his mind as in hers. He did not attach much importance to the whole affair, and felt that he should not be overwhelmed with surprise should he hear a few months later that Sissy was going to be married to some one else, and wanted to make some compromise—perhaps to resign the Squire's legacy to Percival. To his eyes it looked more like an attempt at restitution than anything else. 'She is sorry for him, poor

fellow,' thought Hardwicke. 'She did not know her own mind, and now she would like to atone to him somehow.'

Sissy came back, alone, at the time she had fixed, looking white and anxious. A client came out as she arrived, and five farmers were waiting in the office to see Mr. Hardwicke; therefore, though she was ushered in at once, the interview was brief. The old lawyer paid her a smiling compliment on her promptitude. 'We have to advise people to make their wills sometimes,' he said, 'but you are beforehand with us.' Sissy expressed a fear that she had troubled him on a very busy day; and he assured her that, to blame her, because her twenty-first birthday happened to fall on a Friday, would be the last thing he should think of doing. Then the girl looked up at him, and said that old Mr. Thorne had always been so good to her, and she thought that perhaps, if he could see, he would be glad—so she could not put it off—she stopped abruptly, and her eyes filled. Mr. Hardwicke bent his head in silent acquiescence; the brief document was duly signed and witnessed; and Sissy went away, riding home as if she had never known what fear meant. Suppose Firefly threw her, what then? She had

been to Mr. Hardwicke, and though her 'Cecilia Jane Langton' was not all she could have wished, because she was nervous, and Mr. Hardwicke's pen was so scratchy, still there it was. And was not the paper, thus signed, a talisman against all dread of death?

So her burden was lighter. But what could lighten the other load which lay on her heart? She hardly knew whether it were love or fear that she felt for Percival. The long days which had passed since she saw him, had only deepened the impression of that summer evening when they parted. His reply to her entreaty that he would come back to her had been exactly what she had feared—as gentle as he himself had been when they stood face to face in the old drawing-room at Brackenhill, and as inflexible. If she could forget him—if she could learn to care for Walter Latimer or Captain Fothergill—what a bright, easy, sunshiny life might yet be hers! No—ten thousand times, No! Better to suffer the weariness of dread, and doubt, and longing for Percival.

But Percival would have been astonished if he could have seen the darkly heroic guise in which he reigned over Sissy Langton's dreams.

CHAPTER III.

WALKING TO ST. SYLVESTER'S.

BERTIE LISLE was sorely driven and perplexed, for a few days after his triumphant performance on the organ. His letter was not a failure, but further persuasion was required to make his success complete; and during the brief interval he was persecuted by Gordon's brother.

Mr. William Gordon, when amiable and flattering, had an air of rough and hearty friendliness which was very well, as long as you held him in check. But when, though still amiable, he thought he might begin to take liberties, it was not so well. He was hard, coarse-tongued, and humorous. And when Mr. William Gordon had the upper hand, he showed himself in his true colours as a bully and a blackguard. Bertie Lisle, not yet two-and-twenty, was no match for this man of thirty-five. He owed him money

—no great sum—but more than he could pay. Now that matters had come to this pass, Lisle was heartily ashamed of himself, his debts, and his associates; but the more shame he felt, the more anxious he was that nothing should be known. He had sought the society of these men because he had wearied of the restraints of his home life. Judith checked and controlled him unconsciously, through her very guilelessness. He might have had his liberty in a moment had he chosen, but the assertion of his right would have involved explanations and questions, and Bertie hated scenes. He found it easier to coax Lydia than to face Judith.

But this state of affairs could not go on. Bertie had once fancied that he saw a possible way out of his difficulties, and had hinted to Gordon, with an air of mystery, that though he could not pay at once, he thought he might soon be in a position to pay all. If he hoped to silence his creditors for a while with this vague promise, he was mistaken. Gordon continually reminded him of it. He had not cared to inquire into the source of the coming wealth, but if Lisle meant to rob somebody's till or forge Mr. Clifton's name to a cheque, no doubt Gordon thought he might as well do it and get it over. If you

are going to take a plunge, what, in the name of common sense, is the good of standing shivering on the brink?

Unluckily, Lisle's idea presented difficulties on closer inspection. But as he had gone so far that it was his only hope, he made up his mind to risk all. He saw but one possible way of carrying out his scheme. It was exactly the way which no cautious man would ever have dreamed of taking, and therefore it suited the daring inexperience of the boy. Therefore, also, it was precisely what no one would dream of guarding against. In fact, Bertie was driven, by stress of circumstances, into a stroke of genius. He took his leap, and entered on a period of suspense, anxiety, and sustained excitement, which had a wild exhilaration and sense of recklessness in it. He suffered much from a strong desire to burst into fits of unseasonable laughter. His nerves were so tensely strung that it might have been expected he would be irritable, and so he was sometimes; but never with Judith.

Thorne listened, night after night, for the man with the latch-key; but he listened in vain. He was only partly reassured, for he feared that matters were not going on well at St. Sylvester's. Indeed, he knew they

were not, for Bertie had strolled into his room one day, with a face like a thunder-cloud. The young fellow was out of temper, and perhaps a little off his guard in consequence. When Gordon amused himself by baiting him, Lisle was forced to keep silence; but in this case it was possible, if not quite prudent, to allow himself the relief of speech.

'What is the matter?' said Percival, looking up from his book.

Bertie, who had turned his back on him, stood looking out of the window, and tapping a tune on the pane. 'What's the matter?' he repeated. 'Clifton has taken it into his stupid head to lecture me about some rubbish he has heard somewhere. Why doesn't some one lock him up in an idiot asylum? The meddling fool!'

'If that is qualification enough'—Thorne began, mildly, but Bertie raged on.

'What business is it of his? I'm not going to stand his impudence, as I'll precious soon let him know. A likely story! He didn't buy me body and soul for his paltry salary, though he seems to think it! The old humbug in a cassock! It's a great deal of preaching and very little practice with him, *I* know.'

(He knew nothing of the kind. Mr. Clifton was a well-meaning man, who had never disturbed his mind by analysing his own opinions nor anyone else's, and who worked conscientiously in his parish. But no doubt Bertie had too much respect for truth to let it be mixed up with a fit of ill-temper.)

'Take care what you are about,' said Percival,' as he turned a leaf. He looked absently at the next page. I don't want to interfere with you——"

'Oh, *you*; that's different,' said Lisle, without looking round. 'Not that I should recommend even you——'

'Don't finish—I hope the caution isn't needed. Of course, you will do as you think best. You are your own master, but I know you'll not forget that it is a question of your sister's bread as well as your own. That's all. If you can do better for her——'

Bertie half smiled, but still he looked out of the window, and he did not speak. Presently the fretful tapping on the pane ceased, and he began to whistle the same tune very pleasantly. At last after some time the tune stopped altogether.

'I believe I'm a fool,' said Lisle. 'After all, what harm can Clifton do to me? And, as you say, it would be a pity to make Judith

uneasy. Bless the stupid prig, he shall lecture me again to-morrow if he likes! He hasn't broken any bones this time, and I daresay he won't the next.' The young fellow came lounging across the room, with his hands in his pockets, as he spoke. 'I suppose he has gone on preaching till it's his second nature. Talk of the girl in the fairy tale, dropping toads and things from her lips—why, she was a trifle to old Clifton! I do think he can't open his mouth without letting a sermon run out!'

Thorne was relieved at the turn Bertie's meditations had taken, but he could not think that the young fellow's position at St. Sylvester's was very secure. Neither did Judith. Neither did Bertie himself. The thought did not trouble him, but Judith was evidently anxious.

'You do too much,' said Percival one day to her. They were walking to St. Sylvester's, and Bertie had run back for some music which had been forgotten.

'Perhaps,' said Judith simply. 'But it can't be helped.'

'What, are they all so busy at Standon Square?'

'Well, the holidays being so near make more work—and give one the strength to get through it.'

'I'm not so sure of that. I'm afraid Miss Crawford leaves too much to you, and you will break down.'

'I'm more afraid Miss Crawford will break down. Poor old lady, it goes to my heart to see her. She tries so hard not to see that she is past work—and she is!'

'Is she so old? I didn't know—'

'She was a governess till she was quite middle-aged, and then she had contrived to scrape together enough to open this school. My mother was her first pupil, and the best and dearest of all, she says. She had a terrible uphill time to begin with, and even now it is no very great success. Though she might do very well, poor thing, if they would only let her alone!'

'And who will not let her alone?'

'Oh, there are a swarm of hungry relations, who quarrel over every halfpenny she makes, and she is so good! But you can understand why she is anxious not to think that her harvest time is over.'

'Poor old lady!' said Percival. 'And her strength is failing?'

Judith nodded. 'She does her best, but it makes my heart ache to see her. She comes down in the morning, trying to look so bright and young, in a smart cap and rib-

bons—I feel as if I could cry when I see that cap, and her poor shaky hands going up to it to put it straight. There were tears in the girl's voice as she spoke. 'And her writing! It is always the bad paper, or the bad pen, or the day is darker than any day ever was before!'

'Does she believe all that?' the young man asked.

'I hardly know. I think she never has opened her eyes to the truth, but I suspect she feels that she is keeping them shut. It is just that trying not to see, which is so pathetic, somehow. I find all manner of little excuses for doing the writing, or whatever it may happen to be, instead of her, and then I see her looking at me as if she half doubted me.'

'Does the school fall off at all?'

'I'm not sure. Schools fluctuate you know, and it seems they had scarlet fever about six months ago. That might account for a slight decrease in the numbers—don't you think so?'

'Oh, certainly!' said Percival, with as much confidence as if boarding-school statistics had been the one study of his life. 'No doubt of it.'

They walked a few paces in silence, and then Judith said, 'Perhaps she will be better after the holidays. I think she is very tired,

she is so terribly drowsy. She drops asleep directly she sits down, and is quite sure she has been awake all the time. I'm so afraid the girls may take advantage of it some day.'

'But, even for Miss Crawford's sake, you must not do too much,' urged Percival.

'I will try not. But it is such a comfort to me to be able to help her. If it were not for that, I sometimes question whether I did wisely in coming here at all.'

'If it is not an impertinent question—though I rather think it is—what should you have done, if you had not come?'

'I should have stayed with an aunt of mine. She wanted me, but she would not help Bertie, and I fancied that I could be of use to him. But I doubt if I can do him much good; and, if I lost my situation, I should only be a burden to him.'

'Perhaps that might do him more good than anything,' Percival suggested. 'He might rise to the occasion, and take life in earnest, which is just what he wants, isn't it? For anyone can see how fond he is of you.'

'He's a dear boy,' Judith answered with a smile, and looked over her shoulder. The dear boy was not in sight.

'Plenty of time,' said Percival. 'But it is

rather a long way for him, so often as he has to go to St. Sylvester's.'

'He doesn't mind that. He says he can do it in less than ten minutes, only to-day he had to go back, you see.'

'It isn't so far as it would be to St. Andrew's,' Thorne went on. 'By the way, have you ever been to your parish church?'

'Never. I don't think your description was very inviting.'

'Oh, but it would be worth while to go once. The first time I went I thought it was like a quaint, melancholy dream. Such a dim, hollow, dusty old building, and little cherubs, with grimy little marble faces, looking down from the walls. When the congregation began to shuffle in, each new comer was more decrepit and withered than the last, till I looked to see if they could really be coming through the door-way from the outer world, or whether the vaults were open, and they were the ghosts of some dead and gone congregation of long ago. And when I looked round again, there was the clergyman, in a dingy surplice, as if he had risen like a spectre in his place. He stared at us all with his dull old eyes, and turned the leaves of a great book. And all at once he began to read, in a piping voice, so thin

and weak, that it sounded just like the echo of some former service, as if it had been lost in the dusty corners, and was coming back in a broken, fragmentary way. It was all the more like an echo, because the old clerk is very deaf, and he begins in a haphazard fashion, when he thinks it is time for the other to have done. So sometimes there is a long pause, and then you have their two old voices mixed up together, like an echo when it grows confused. It is very strange —gives one all manner of quaint fancies. You should go once. Nothing could be more utterly unlike St. Sylvester's.'

'I think I will go,' said Judith. 'I know a church something like that, only not quite so dead. There is a queer old clerk there, too.'

'Where is that?'

'Oh, it isn't anywhere near here. A little, old-fashioned, country town—Rookleigh.'

Percival turned eagerly. 'Where did you say? *Rookleigh?*'

'Yes. Why, do you know anything of it?'

'Tell me what you know of it.'

'My aunt, Miss Lisle, lives there. The aunt I was telling you about, who wanted me to stay with her.'

'And you were there last summer?'

'Yes. In fact, I was there on a visit when I heard that—that our home was broken up. I stayed on for some time, I had nowhere to go.'

"Miss Lisle lives in a red house by the river-side,' said Percival, prompted by a sudden impulse.

It was Judith's turn to look surprised. 'Yes, she does. But, Mr. Thorne, how do you know?'

'The garden slopes to the water's edge,' he went on, not heeding her. 'And there is a wide gravel path, down the middle, cutting it exactly in two. It is all very neat—it is wonderfully neat, and Miss Lisle comes down the path, looking right and left, to see whether all the carnations and the chrysanthemum plants are tied up properly, and whether there are any snails.'

'Mr. Thorne, who told you—? No, you must have seen.'

'But you didn't walk with her. There was a cross path behind some evergreens—'

'Yes,' said Judith, 'I hated to be seen then. I couldn't go beyond the garden, and I used to walk backwards and forwards there, so many times to a mile. I forget how many now. But, Mr. Thorne, tell me, how do you know all this?'

'It is simple enough,' he said. I was at Rookleigh one day, and I strolled along the path by the river. You can see the house from the further side. I stood and looked at it.'

'Yes—but how did you know whose house it was?'

'I hadn't the least idea. But it took my fancy, why I don't know. And while I was looking, I saw that some one came and went behind the evergreens.'

'Then it was only a guess when you began to describe it?'

'Well, I suppose so, it must have been, mustn't it?' he said, looking curiously at her. 'But it felt like a certainty.'

They were just at St. Sylvester's and Bertie ran up, panting, waving his music. 'Lucky I've not got to sing,' said the young fellow in a jerky voice, and rushed to the vestry door, where Mr. Clifton fidgeted, watch in hand. After such a race it was natural enough that the young organist should be somewhat flushed, as he went up the aisle, with a surpliced boy at his heels. But Judith had not hurried, had rather lingered, looking back. What was the meaning of that soft rosy glow upon her cheeks? And why was Thorne so absent, standing

up, and sitting down, mechanically, till the service was half over before he knew it?

He was recalling that day at Rookleigh, the red houses by the water-side, the poplars, the pigeons, the old church, the sleepy streets, the hot blue sky, the grey glitter of the river through the boughs, and the girl half seen behind the evergreens. She had been to him like a fair faint figure in a dream, and the airy fancies, that clustered round her, had been more dreamy yet. But suddenly the dream girl had stepped out of the clouds into every-day life, and stood in flesh and blood beside him. And the nameless fascination with which his imagination had played was revealed as the self-same attraction as that which his soul had known, when, years before, he first met Judith Lisle.

CHAPTER IV.

FAINT HEART WINS FAIR LADY.

PERCIVAL THORNE would have readily declared that it was a matter of utter indifference to him, whether his landlady went, at the end of March, to pay a three weeks' visit to her eldest sister, or whether she stayed at home. He took very little notice when Mrs. Bryant told him of her intention. She talked for some time. When she was gone, Thorne found himself left with the impression, that the lady in question was a Mrs. Smith, residing somewhere in Bethnal Green; that some one was a plumber and glazier; that some one had had the measles; that trade was not all one could wish; nor were Mrs. Bryant's relations quite what they should have been; but that, she thanked goodness, they were not all alike. This struck him as a reasonable cause for thankfulness, as otherwise there would certainly have been a ter-

rible monotony in the family circle. He also had an idea that Mrs. Smith had received a great deal of good advice on the subject of her marriage, and he rather thought that Smith was not the sort of man to make a woman happy. 'Either Smith isn't—or Bryant wasn't when he was alive—now which was it?' smiled Percival to himself, ruffling his wavy hair, and leaning back in his chair, with a confused sense of relief. And the dispute about the grandmother's crockery came in, and the uncle who had a bit of money, and married the widow at Margate. 'I hope to goodness Mrs. Bryant will stay away some time, if she has half as much to say on her return.'

The good woman had not gone into Mr. Thorne's room for the purpose of giving him all this information. It had come naturally to her lips when she found herself there, but she merely wished to suggest to him that Lydia would be busy while she was away, and money matters were terribly muddling, weren't they? —and perhaps it would make it easier if Mr. Thorne's bill stood over ——. Percival understood in a moment. The careworn face, the confused manner, told him all. Lydia would probably waste the money, and the old lady, though with perceptible hesitation, had

decided to trust him rather than her daughter. It was so. Lydia considered that her mother was stingy, and that finery was indispensable while she was husband-hunting.

'You see, there'll be one less to feed, and it would only bother her, and you've always been so regular with your money,'—said Mrs. Bryant, wistfully.

'Oh, I see perfectly,' Thorne replied. 'I won't trouble Miss Bryant about it. It shall be all ready for you when you come back, of course. A pleasant journey to you.'

The old lady went off, not without anxiety, but very favourably impressed with Percival's lofty manner. And he thought no more about it. But the time came when he wished that Mrs. Bryant had never thought of visiting Mrs. Smith of Bethnal Green at all.

Easter fell very late that year, far on in April, and it seemed to Judith that the holidays would never come. At last, however, they were within a week of the breaking-up day. It was Sunday, and she could say to herself, 'Next Thursday I shall be free.'

Bertie and she had just breakfasted, and he was leaning in his favourite attitude against the chimneypiece. She had taxed him with looking ill, but he had smilingly declared that there was nothing amiss with him.

'Do you sleep well, Bertie?' she asked wistfully.

'Pretty well. Not very much last night, by the way. But you are whiter than I am—look at yourself in the glass. Even if you deduct the green——'

Judith gazed into the verdant depths. 'I don't know how much to allow,' she said thoughtfully. By the way, Bertie, I am not going with you to St. Sylvester's this morning.'

'All right,' said Bertie.

'I have a fancy to go to St. Andrew's for once,' said Judith, arranging a ribbon at her throat as she spoke. 'Just for a change. You don't mind, do you?'

'Mind—no!' said Bertie, but something in his voice caused her to look round. He was as pale as death, grasping the chimney-piece with one hand, while the other was pressed upon his heart.

'Bertie! You *are* ill! Lean on me.' The little sofa was close by, and she helped him to it, and ran for eau de cologne. When she came back he was lying with his head thrown back, white, and still, yet looking more like himself than in that first ghastly moment. Presently the blood came back to cheek and lip, and he looked up and smiled. 'You are better?' she said anxiously.

'Oh yes! I'm better. I'm all right. Can't think what made me make such a fool of myself.'

'No—don't get up. Lie still a little longer,' said Judith, standing over him, with the wicker flask in her hand. 'Oh, how you frightened me!'

'Don't pour any more of that stuff over me,' he answered, languidly. 'You must have expended quarts. I can feel little rivulets of it creep-creeping at the roots of my hair.'

'But, Bertie, what was the matter with you?'

'I hardly know. It's all over now. My heart seemed to stop beating just for a moment. I wonder if it did, really? Or should I have died? Do sit down, Judith. You look as if you were going to faint too.'

She sat down by him. After a minute Bertie's slim, long fingers groped restlessly, and she held them in a tender grasp. So for some time they remained hand in hand. Judith watched him furtively, as he lay with closed eyes, his fair boyish face pressed on the dingy cushion, and a great tenderness lighted her quiet glance. Suddenly Bertie's eyes opened, and met hers. She answered his look of inquiry.

'You are all I have, dear. We two are alone, are we not? I must be anxious if you are ill.'

He pressed her hand, but he turned his face a little away, conscious at the same moment of a flush of self-reproach, and of a lurking smile. 'Dont!' he said. 'I'm not ill. I'm all right now—never better. Isn't it time for me to be off? I say, my dear girl, if you don't look sharp, you'll be late at St. Andrew's.'

'St. Andrew's!' she repeated scornfully. '*I* go to St. Andrew's *now*, and think all the service through that my bad boy may be fainting at St. Sylvester's! No, no; I shall go with you.'

'Thank you,' said Bertie, sitting up, and running his fingers through his hair, by way of preparation for church. 'I shall be glad, if you don't mind.'

'That is,' she went on, 'if you are fit to go at all.'

'O yes. I couldn't leave old Clifton in the lurch, for anything short of sudden death, and even then he'd feel himself ill used. Stay at home because I felt faint! It would be as much as my place is worth,' said Bertie, with a smile, of which Judith could not understand the fine irony.

'I'll go and get ready,' she said. But she went to the door of Percival's sitting-room and knocked.

'Come in,' he answered, and she opened it. He was stooping over his fire, poker in hand. She paused on the threshold, and, after breaking a hard lump of coal, he looked over his shoulder. 'Miss Lisle! I beg your pardon. I thought they had come for the breakfast things.'

'Oh!' she said, in a slightly disappointed tone. 'You are not going to church to-day.' For Thorne was more picturesquely careless in his apparel than is the wont of the British church-goer.

A rapid change of mind enabled him to answer truthfully 'Yes, I am. I ought to get ready, I suppose. Did you want me for anything, Miss Lisle?'

'Were you going to St. Sylvester's, or not?

Percival had known by her tone that she wanted him to go to church. But he did not know which church claimed his attendance, so he answered cautiously, 'Oh, I hardly know. I think I should like some one to make up my mind for me. Are you going with your brother?'

'Yes,' said Judith. 'He isn't very well to-day. I was rather frightened by his fainting just now.'

'Of course I'll go with you,' said Percival. 'I'll be ready in two minutes. Been fainting? Is he better now?'

'Much better. Will you really?' And Judith vanished.

Percival was perhaps a little longer than the time he had named, but he soon came out in a very different character from that of the young man who had lounged over his late breakfast, in his shabby coat. He looked anxiously at young Lisle as they started, but Bertie's appearance was hardly such as to call for immediate alarm. He seemed well enough, Percival thought, though perhaps a little excited. In truth, there was not much amiss with him. He had got over the uneasy sense of self-reproach; the sudden shock which had caused his dismay was past, and as he went his way, solemnly escorted by his loving sister and his devoted friend, he was suffering much more from suppressed laughter than from anything else. Everything was a joke, and the narrowness of his escape that morning a greater joke than all. 'By Jove! what a laugh we will have over it, one of these days!' thought Lisle, as he put on his surplice.

Loving eyes followed him as he went to his place, and his name was fondly breathed in loving prayers.

CHAPTER V.

THE LAST MUSIC LESSON.

On the Tuesday morning Bertie was late for breakfast, and came in yawning rather ostentatiously. Judith protested good humouredly. 'Lie in bed late, *or* yawn, but you can't want to do both. Why it is eleven hours since you went up to bed.' This was perfectly true, but not so much to the point as she supposed.

Ever since the mysterious fainting fit, Judith had watched him with tender anxiety, and it seemed to her that there was something strange in his manner that morning. She did not know what it was, but had she held any clue to his thoughts, she would have perceived that Bertie was astonished and bewildered. He looked as if a dream had suddenly become a reality, as if a jest had turned into marvellous earnest. He smoked his pipe, leaning by the open window, with a serious, and almost awe-struck expression in his eyes.

One might have fancied that he was transformed, visibly to himself, and was perplexed to find that the change was invisible to others. Judith could not understand this quiet gravity.

She came up to him, and laid her hand caressingly on his shoulder. He did not turn, but pointed with the stem of his pipe across the street.

'Look,' he said. 'There's a bit of houseleek on those tiles. I never saw it till to-day.'

'Nor I.'

'It looks green and pleasant,' said Bertie in a gentle meditative voice. 'I like it.'

'Our summer garden,' Judith suggested.

'I wonder if there's any houseleek on our roof,' he went on after a moment.

'We will hope so, for our neighbours' sake,' said his sister. 'It's a new idea to me. I thought our roof was nothing but tiles and cats—principally cats.'

Bertie smoked his pipe, and surveyed the houseleek as if it were a newly discovered star. Everything was strange and wonderful that morning. Vague ideas floated in the atmosphere, half seen against the background of common things. The mood, born of exceptional circumstances, was unique in his life. Had it been habitual, there would have

been hope of a new poet, or, since his taste lay in the direction of wordless harmony, of a great musician.

'You won't be late at the Square, Bertie dear?' said Judith.

'No. I'll not be late,' he answered absently. He felt that the pale gold of the April sunlight was beautiful even in Bellevue Street.

'The last lesson,' she said. Bertie, suddenly roused, looked round at her with startled eyes. 'What! had you forgotten that the girls go home to-morrow?' cried Judith in great surprise. She had counted the days so often.

He laughed, shortly and uneasily, 'I suppose I had. Queer, wasn't it? Yes, it's my last lesson, as you say. If I had only thought of it, I might have composed a Lament, taught it to all my pupils, and charged a fancy price for it in the bill.'

'That would have been very touching. A little tiresome to you, perhaps, and to Miss Crawford—'

'Bless you! She's always asleep,' said Bertie, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, and pocketing it. I might teach them the Old Hundredth, one after the other, all the morning through. She wouldn't know. So your work ends to-morrow?'

'Not quite. The girls go to-morrow, but I have promised to be at the Square on Thursday. There's a good deal to be done, and I should like to see Miss Crawford safely off in the afternoon.'

'Where's the old woman going?'

'To Cromer for a few days. She lived there as a child, and loves it more than any place in the world.'

'Does the poor old lady think she'll grow young again there?' said Bertie. 'Well, perhaps she will,' he added after a pause. 'At any rate she may forget that she has grown old.'

Punctually at the appointed hour, the young music master arrived in Standon Square. It was for the last time, as Judith had said. Miss Crawford looked older, and Miss Crawford's cap looked newer, than either had ever done before. She put her weak little hand into Bertie's, and said some prim, kindly words, about the satisfaction his lessons had given, the progress his pupils had made, and the confidence she felt in his sister and himself. As she spoke she was sure he was gratified, for the colour mounted to his face. Suddenly she stopped in the midst of her neatly worded sentences. 'You are like your mother, Mr. Lisle,' she said; 'I never saw it so much before.' And she murmured

something, half to herself, about her first pupil, the dearest of them all. Bertie, for once in his life, was silent and bashful.

The old lady rang the bell, and requested that Miss Macdonald might be told that it was time for her lesson, and that Mr. Lisle had arrived. During the brief interval that ensued, the music master looked furtively round the room, as if he had never seen it before. It seemed to him almost as if he looked at it with different eyes, and read Miss Crawford's life in it. It was a prim, light-coloured drawing-room, adorned with many trifles, which were interesting as indications of patience, and curious in point of taste. There was a great deal of worsted work, and still more crochet. Everything that could possibly stand on a mat, stood on a mat, and other mats lay disconsolately about, waiting, as cabmen wait, for a fare. Each piece of furniture was carefully arranged, with a view to supporting the greatest possible number of antimacassars. There were water-colour paintings on the walls, and bouquets of wax flowers bloomed gaily under glass shades on every table. There were screens, cushions, pen-wipers. Bertie calculated that Miss Crawford's drawing-room might yield several quarts of beads. He had seen all these things

many times, but they had acquired a new meaning and interest that day.

Miss Macdonald appeared, and Miss Crawford seated herself on a pink rose, about the size of a Jersey cabbage, with two colossal buds, and rested her tired back against a similar group. At the first notes of the piano her watchful and smiling face relaxed, and she nodded wearily in the background. It did not matter much. The young master was grave, silent, patient, conscientious. In fact, it did not matter at all. Having slept through the earlier lessons, the schoolmistress might well sleep through this. It was rather a pity, that instead of taking a placid and unbroken rest on the sofa, she sat stiffly on a worked chair, and started into uneasy wakefulness between each lesson, dismissing one girl and sending for the next with infinite politeness and propriety. At last she said, 'And will you have the kindness to tell Miss Nash?'

Bertie sat, turning over a piece of music, till the sound of the opening door told him that his pupil had arrived. Then he rose and looked in her direction, but avoided her eyes.

There was no schoolgirl slovenliness about Emmeline Nash. Her grey dress was fresh and neat, a tiny bunch of spring flowers

was fastened in it, a ribbon of delicate blue was round her neck. As she came forward with a slight flush on her cheek, her head carried defiantly, and the sunlight shining on her pale hair, Miss Crawford said to herself that really she was a stylish girl, ladylike and pretty. Her schoolfellows declared that Emmeline always went about with her mouth hanging open. But that day the parted lips had an innocent expression of wonder and expectation.

The lesson was begun in as business-like a fashion as the others. Perhaps Emmeline regaled the young master with a few more false notes than usual, but she was curiously intent on the page before her. Presently she stole a glance over her shoulder at Miss Crawford. She was asleep. Emmeline played a few bars mechanically, and then she turned to Bertie.

The eyes which met her own had an anxious, tender, almost reverential expression. This slim fair girl had suddenly become a very wonderful being to Lisle, and he touched her hand with delicate respect and looked strangely at her pretty vacant face.

Had there been the usual laughter lurking in his glance, Emmeline would have giggled. Her nerves were tensely strung,

and giggling was her sole expression for a wide range of emotion. But his gravity astonished her so much that she looked at the page before her again, and went on playing with her mouth open.

Towards the close of the lesson, master and pupil exchanged a few whispered words. 'You may rely on me,' said Bertie finally; 'what did I promise this morning?' He spoke cautiously, watching Miss Crawford. She moved in her slight slumber and uttered an inarticulate sound. The young people started asunder, and blushed a guilty red. Emmeline with an unfounded assumption of presence of mind, began to play a variation, containing such loud and agitated discords, that further slumber must have been miraculous. But Lisle interposed, 'Gently,' he said. 'Let me show you how that should be played.' And he lulled the sleeper with the tenderest harmony.

In due time the lesson came to an end. Miss Crawford presided over the farewell, and regretted that it was really Miss Nash's last lesson, as (though Mr. Lisle perhaps was not aware of it) she was not coming back to Standon Square. Mr. Lisle, in his turn, expressed much regret, and said that he should miss his pupil. 'You must on no

account forget to practise every day,' said the old lady, turning to Emmeline. 'Must she, Mr. Lisle?'

Mr. Lisle hoped that Miss Nash would devote at least three hours every day to her music. The falsehood was so audacious that he shuddered as he uttered it. He made a ceremonious bow, and fled.

Going back to Bellevue Street he locked himself into his room, and turned out all his worldly goods. A little portmanteau was carefully packed with a selection from them and hidden away in a cupboard, and the rest were laid by as nearly as possible in their accustomed order. Then he took out his purse, and examined its contents with dissatisfied eyes.

'Can't get on without the sinews of war,' Bertie soliloquized. 'I might manage with double as much perhaps, but how shall I get it? Spoiling the Egyptians would be the Scriptural course of conduct, I suppose, and I'm ready—but where are the Egyptians? I wonder if Judith keeps a hoard anywhere. Or Lydia—shall I go and ask her to lend me jewels of silver and jewels of gold? Poor Lydia, I fear I could hardly find a plausible excuse for borrowing the blue earrings. And I doubt they wouldn't help me much.

No, I must find some better plan than that.'

He was intensely excited, his flushed cheek and glittering eyes betrayed it. But the feelings of the morning had worn off in the practical work of packing and preparing for his flight. Perhaps it was as well they had, for they could hardly have survived an interview with Lydia in the afternoon. She was suspicious, and required coaxing to begin with.

'Why, what's the matter, Lydia?' said Lisle at last in his gentlest voice. 'You might do this for me.'

'You're always wanting something done for you.'

'Oh Lydia! and I've been such a good boy lately!'

'Too good by half,' said Lydia.

'And a month ago I was always too bad. How am I to hit your precise taste in wickedness?'

'Oh, I ain't particular to a shade,' said Lydia, 'as you might know by my helping you to deceive Ma and your sister. But as to your goodness, I don't believe in it—so there! Don't tell me—people don't give up all at once, and go to bed at ten o'clock every night, and turn as good as all that. It's my

belief you mean to bolt. What have you been doing?'

'Look here, Lydia, I've told you once and I tell you again—I want a holiday, and I'm off for two or three days by myself—can't be tied to my sister's apron-string all my life. But I'd rather not have any fuss about it, so I shall just go quietly and send her a line when I've started. I want you to get that portmanteau off, so that I may pick it up at the station to-morrow morning. I *did* think I might count on *you*,' said Bertie with heart-rending pathos—delicately shaded acting would have been wasted on Miss Bryant—'You've always been as true as steel. But it seems I was mistaken. Well, no matter. If my sister makes a scene about my going away, it can't be helped. Perhaps I was wrong to keep my little secrets from her and trust them to any one else.'

'I don't say that,' Lydia replied. 'P'rhaps others may do as well or better by you.'

'Thank you all the same for your former kindness,' Bertie continued in a tone of gentle resignation, ignoring her remark. 'Since you won't, there's nothing more to be said.'

'What do you want to fly off in that fashion for?' said Lydia. 'I'll see about your portmanteau, if this is all true—'

Bertie assumed an insulted-gentleman air. It was extremely lofty.

'Oh, if you doubt me, Miss Bryant—'

'Gracious me! You *are* touchy!' exclaimed poor Lydia in perplexity and distress. 'Only one word—you haven't been doing anything bad?'

'On my honour — no,' said Bertie haughtily.

'And there's nothing wrong about the portmanteau?'

'Oh, this is too much!' Lisle exclaimed. 'I can't be cross-questioned in this fashion—even by *you*'—the careless parenthesis was not without effect—'Wrong about it—no! But we'll leave the subject altogether, if you please. I won't trouble you any further.'

It was evident to Lydia that he was offended. There was an angry light in his eyes and his cheeks were flushed. "You *are* unkind,' she said. 'I'll see about it for you—and you knew I would.' She saw Bertie's handsome face dimly, through a mist of gathering tears.

'Crying?' said Lisle. 'Not for me, Lydia? I'm not worth it.'

'That I'll be bound you are not,' said the girl.

'Then why do you do it?'

'Perhaps you think we always measure our tears, and mind we don't give overweight,' said Lydia scornfully. 'Shouldn't cry much at that rate, I expect! I do it because I'm a fool, if you particularly want to know.'

Lisle was wondering what style of answer would be suitable and harmless, when Mr. Fordham came up the stairs. Lydia saw him, exclaimed, 'Oh my good gracious!' and vanished, while Bertie strolled into his room, invoking blessings on the old man's head.

That evening there was a choir practice at St. Sylvester's. Mr. Clifton was peculiarly tiresome, and the young organist replied with an air of easy scorn, the more irritating that it was so good-humoured. Had the worthy incumbent been a shade less musical, there would have been a quarrel then and there. But how could he part with a man who played so splendidly? Bertie received his instructions as to their next meeting with an unmoved face. 'It is so important now that Easter is so near,' said the clergyman. 'Thursday evening, and you won't be late?'

'Au revoir then,' said Lisle airily, 'since we are to meet so soon.' And with a pleasant smile he went his way.

When he got back he found Judith at

home, looking worn and white. He was tenderly reproachful. 'I'm sure you want your tea,' he said. 'You should not have thought about me.' He waited on her, he busied himself about her in a dozen little ways. He was bright, gay, affectionate. A faint colour flushed her face, and a smile dawned on her lips. How could she fail to be pleased and touched? How could she do otherwise than smile at this paragon of young brothers? He talked of holiday schemes, in a happy, though rather random, fashion. He sang snatches of songs, softly, in his pleasant tenor voice.

'Bertie, our mother used to sing that,' said Judith, after one of them.

'Did she?' He paused. 'I don't remember.'

'No, you can't,' she answered sorrowfully. 'I wish you could.'

'I've only the faintest and most shadowy recollection—just a dim idea of somebody,' he replied. 'But in my little childish troubles I always had you. I don't think I wanted anyone else.'

Judith took his hand in hers and held it for a moment, fondly clasped. 'You can't think how much I like to hear you say that.'

Lisle blushed, and was thankful for the

dim light. 'Do you know,' he said hurriedly, 'I rather think I may have a chance of giving old Clifton warning before long.'

'Oh, Bertie! Where could you get anything else as good?'

'Not five and twenty miles away.' Bertie named a place which they had passed on their journey to Brenthill. 'Gordon of our choir told me of it this evening. I think I shall run over to-morrow, and make inquiries.'

'But why would it be so much better?'

'There's a big grammar school, and they have a chapel. I should be organist there.'

'But do they pay more?' she persisted.

'Hardly as much to the organist, perhaps. But I could give lessons in the school, Gordon tells me, and make no end of money so. Oh, it would be a first-rate thing for me!'

'And for me?'

'Oh, I hope you won't have to go on slaving for Miss Crawford. You must come and keep house—' Bertie stopped abruptly. He could deceive on a grand scale, but these small fibs, which came unexpectedly, confused him, and stuck in his throat.

'Keep house for you? Is that all I am to do? Bertie, how rich do you hope to be?'

'Rich enough to keep you, very soon,' he answered gravely.

'But does Mr. Gordon think you have a chance of this appointment?'

'Why not?' said Bertie. 'I am fit for it.' There was no arrogance in his simple statement of the fact.

'I know you are. All the same I think I won't give up my situation till we see how this new plan turns out. And I don't want to be idle.'

'But I don't want you to work,' said Bertie. 'You are killing yourself, and you know it. Well, this is worth inquiring about, at any rate, is'nt it?'

'Yes, it certainly is. It sounds very pleasant. But pray don't be rash; don't give up what you have already, until you quite see your way.'

'No—but I think I do see it. I'll just take the 8.35 train to-morrow, and find out how the land lies. I can be back early in the afternoon.'

So the matter was settled. As they went off to bed, Lisle casually remarked that he had not seen Thorne that day. 'Is he out, I wonder?'

Miss Bryant was making her nightly examination of the premises. She overheard

the remark as she turned down the gas in the passage, and informed them that when Mr. Thorne came in from the office he complained of a headache, asked for a cup of tea, and went early to bed. 'Poor fellow!' said Lisle. 'Good-night, Miss Bryant.'

Apparently Percival's headache did not keep him in bed; for a light gleamed dimly in his sitting-room late that Tuesday night.

CHAPTER VI.

A THUNDERBOLT IN STANDON SQUARE.

It was just one o'clock on the following Thursday, and Thorne was walking from the office to Bellevue Street. He had adopted a quicker and more business-like pace than in old days, and came down the street with long steps, his head high, and an abstracted expression on his face. Suddenly he stopped. 'Miss Lisle!' he exclaimed. 'Good God! What is the matter?'

It was Judith, but so pale, with fear and horror looking so terribly out of her eyes, that she was like a spectre of herself. She stopped short as he had done, and gazed blankly at him.

'Judith, what is it?' he repeated: 'For God's sake, speak. What is the matter?'

He saw that she made a great effort to look like her usual self, and that she partly succeeded.

'I don't know,' she answered. 'Please come, Mr. Thorne, but don't say anything to me yet. Not a word, please.'

In silence he offered her his arm. She took it, and they went on together. Something in Judith Lisle always appealed with peculiar force to Percival's loyalty. He piqued himself on not even looking inquiringly at his companion as they walked, but he felt her hand quivering on his arm, and his brain was busy with conjectures. 'Bertie has been away the last day or two,' he said to himself. 'Can she have heard any bad news of him? But why is she so mysterious about it, for she is not the girl to make a needless mystery?' When they reached Bellevue Street she quitted his arm, thanked him with a look, and went upstairs. Percival followed her.

She opened the door of her sitting-room, and looked in. Then she turned to the young man who stood gravely in the background, as if awaiting her orders.

'Will you come in?' she said. But when she thought he was about to speak, she made a quick motion with her hand. 'Not yet, please.'

The cloth was laid, but some books and papers had been pushed to one end of the table. Judith went to them, and lifted them

carefully, as if she were looking for something. Then she went to the little side-table. Then to the chimney-piece, still seeking, while Thorne stood by the window, silently waiting.

The search was evidently unavailing, and Judith rang the bell. During the pause which ensued, she rested her elbow on the back of Bertie's easy chair, and covered her eyes with her hand. She was shaking from head to foot, but, when the door opened, she stood up, and tried to speak in her usual voice.

'Are there any letters by the second post for me, Emma?'

The little maid looked wonderingly at Mr. Thorne, and then at Miss Lisle. 'No, ma'am. I always bring 'em up.'

'I know you do, but I thought they might have been forgotten. Will you ask Miss Bryant if she is quite sure none came for me this morning?'

There was another silence while Emma went on her errand. She came back with Miss Bryant's compliments, and no letters had come for Miss Lisle.

'Thank you,' said Judith. 'That will do. I will ring when I want dinner brought in.'

When they were left alone, Percival stepped forward. 'What is it?' he said. 'You will tell me now.'

She answered with averted eyes. 'You know that our school broke up yesterday? Emmeline Nash went away by the nine o'clock train, but she has never gone home!'

'Has never gone home!' Percival repeated. 'That is very strange. She must have met with some accident.' There was no answer. 'It may not be anything serious—surely you are distressing yourself too much.'

Judith looked up into his face with questioning eyes.

'Or perhaps it is some school-girl freak,' Thorne went on. 'Naturally, Miss Crawford must be very anxious; but don't make up your mind to the worst, till you know for certain.'

Still that anxious questioning look, as if she would read his very soul. Percival was startled and perplexed, and his eyes made no response. The girl turned away with a faint cry of impatience and despair.

'And I am his own sister!'

Percival stood for a moment thunderstruck. Then 'Bertie!' he said.

'But you did not think of him till I spoke,' she answered, passionately. 'It was my doing—mine!'

'Where is Bertie?' Thorne asked the question with something of her fear in his eyes.

'I don't know. I had that yesterday morning.'

He took a pencilled scrap of paper from her hand. Bertie had written,

'I find I cannot be back this afternoon, probably not till to-morrow. Don't expect me till you see me, and don't be anxious about me. All right.—Your H. L.'

'How did you get this?' he asked, turning it uneasily in his fingers.

'A boy brought it from the station, not half an hour after he went.'

Percival was silent. A sudden certainty had sprung up in his mind, and it made any attempt at reassuring her little better than a lie. Yet he felt as if his certainty were altogether unfounded. He could assign no reason for it. The truth was that Bertie himself was the reason, and Percival knew him better than he had supposed.

'Mr. Thorne,' said Judith, 'don't you hate me for what I've said? Surely you must. Miss Crawford doesn't dream that Bertie has anything to do with this. And you didn't, for I watched your eyes—you would never have thought of him but for me. It is I, his own sister, who have hinted it. He has nobody but me, and when his back is turned I accuse him of being so base, so

cruel, so mercenary, that——' She stopped and tried to steady her voice. Suddenly she turned and pointed to the door. 'And if he came in there now, this minute—Oh, Bertie, my Bertie, if you *would!*—if he stood there now, I should have slandered him without a shadow of proof. Oh, it is odious, horrible! The one in all the world who should have clung to him and believed in him, and I have thought this of him! Say it is horrible, unnatural—reproach me—leave me! Oh, my God! You can't.'

And in truth Percival stood mute and grave, holding the shred of paper in his hand, and making no sign through all the questioning pauses in her words. But her last appeal roused him.

'No,' he said gently. 'I can't reproach you. If you are the first to think this, don't I know that you will be the one to hope and pray when others give up.' He took her hands in his. She suffered him to do what he would. 'How should Miss Crawford think of him?' he said. 'Pray God we may be mistaken, and if Bertie comes back, can we not keep silence for ever?'

'I could not look him in the face.'

'Tell me all,' said Thorne. 'Where did he say he was going? Tell me everything.

If you are calm, and if we lose no time, we may unravel this mystery, and clear Bertie altogether before any harm is done. As you say, there is no shadow of proof. Miss Nash may have gone away alone—schoolgirls have silly fancies. Or perhaps some accident on the line——.'

'No,' said Judith.

'No? Are you sure? Sit down and tell me all.'

She obeyed to the best of her ability. She told him what Bertie had said about the situation he hoped to obtain, and what little she knew about Emmeline's disappearance.

Percival listened, with a face which grew more anxious with every word.

This is what had actually happened that morning at Standon Square. Judith was busy over Miss Crawford's accounts. She remembered so well the column of figures, and the doubtful hieroglyphic which might be an 8, but was quite as likely to be a 3. While she sat gazing at it, and weighing probabilities in her mind, the housemaid appeared, with an urgent request that she would go to Miss Crawford at once. Obeying the summons, she found the old lady looking at an unopened letter which lay on the table before her.

'My dear,' said the little schoolmistress,

'look at this.' There was a tone of hurried anxiety in her voice, and she held it out with fingers that trembled a little.

It was directed in a gentleman's hand, neat and old-fashioned—

Miss Emmeline Nash,
Care of Miss Crawford,
Montague House,
Standon Square,
Brenthill.

Judith glanced eagerly at the envelope. For a moment she had feared that it might be some folly of Bertie's addressed to one of the girls. But this was no writing of his, and she breathed again.

'To Emmeline,' she said. 'From some one who did not know when you broke up. Did you want me to direct it to be forwarded?'

'Forwarded—where? Do you know who wrote that letter!' By this time Miss Crawford's crisp ribbons were quivering like aspen leaves.

'No—who? Is there anything wrong about this correspondent of Emmeline's? I thought you would forward it to her at home. Dear Miss Crawford, what is the matter?'

'That is Mr. Nash's writing—Oh, Judith, what does it mean? She went away yesterday to his house, and he writes to her here!'

The girl was taken aback for a moment, but her swift common sense came to her aid. 'It means that Mr. Nash has an untrustworthy servant, who has carried his master's letter in his pocket, and posted it a day too late, rather than own his carelessness. Some directions about Emmeline's journey—open it and see.'

'Ah! possibly—I never thought of that,' said Miss Crawford, feeling for her glasses. 'But,' her fears returning in a moment, 'I ought to have heard from Emmeline.'

'When? She would hardly write the night she got there. You were sure not to hear this morning, you know how she puts things off. The midday post will be in directly; perhaps you'll hear then. Open the letter now, and set your mind at rest.'

The envelope was torn open. 'Now, you'll see he wrote it on the 18th—Good heavens! It's dated yesterday!'

'My dear Emmeline,—Since Miss Crawford wishes you to remain two days longer for this lesson you talk of, I can have no possible objection; but I wish you could have let me known a little sooner. You very thoughtfully say you will not give me the trouble of writing if I grant your request. I suppose it never occurred to you that by the

time your letter reached me every arrangement had been made for your arrival—a greater trouble, which might have been avoided if you had written earlier. Neither did you give me much choice in the matter.

'But I will not find fault just when you are coming home. I took you at your word when your letter arrived yesterday, and did not write. But to-day it has occurred to me that after all you might like a line, and that Miss Crawford would be glad to know that you will be met at the end of your journey.'

Compliments to the schoolmistress followed, and the signature, 'Henry Nash.'

The two women read this epistle with intense anxiety. But while Miss Crawford was painfully deciphering it, and had only realised the terrible fact that Emmeline was lost, the girl's quicker brain had snatched its meaning at a glance. She saw the cunning scheme to secure two days of unsuspected liberty. Who had planned this? Who had so cleverly dissuaded Mr. Nash from writing? And what had the brainless, sentimental schoolgirl done with the time?

'Where is she?' cried Miss Crawford, clinging feebly to Judith. 'Oh, has there been some accident?'

'No accident,' said Judith. 'Do you not

see that it was planned beforehand? She never thought of staying till Friday.'

'No, never. Oh, my dear, I don't seem able to understand. Don't you think perhaps my head will be clearer in a minute or two? Where can she be?'

The poor old lady looked vaguely about, as if Miss Nash might be playing hide-and-seek behind the furniture. Her face was veined and ghastly. She hardly comprehended the blow which was falling upon her, but she shivered hopelessly, and thought she should understand soon, and looked up at Judith with a mute appeal in her dim eyes.

'Where can she be?' The girl echoed Miss Crawford's words half to herself. 'What ought we to do?'

'I can't think why she wrote and told them not to meet her on Wednesday,' said the old lady. 'So timid as Emmeline always was, and she hated travelling alone. Oh, Judith, has she run away with some one?'

A cold hand seemed to clutch Judith's heart, and her face was like marble. Bertie! Oh, no—no—no! Not her brother! This treachery could not be his work. Yet 'Bertie' flashed before her eyes, as if the name were written in letters of flame on Mr. Nash's open note, on the wall, the floor,

the ceiling. It swam in a fiery haze between Miss Crawford and herself.

She stood with her hands tightly clasped, and her lips compressed. It seemed to her that if she relaxed the tension of her muscles for one moment, Bertie's name would force its way out in spite of her. And even in that first dismay she was conscious that she had no ground for her belief but an unreasoning instinct, and the mere fact that Bertie was away.

'Help me, Judith!' said Miss Crawford, pitifully. She trembled as she clung to the girl's shoulder. 'I'm not so young as I used to be, you know. I don't feel as if I could stand it. Oh, if only your mamma were here.'

Judith answered with a sob. Miss Crawford's confession of old age went to her heart. So did that pathetic cry, which was half longing for her who had been so many years at rest, and half for Miss Crawford's own stronger and brighter self of bygone days. She put her arm round the schoolmistress, and held up the shaking, unsubstantial little figure.

'If Bertie has done this, he has killed her,' said the girl to herself, even while she declared aloud, 'I *will* help you, dear Miss

Crawford. I will do all I can. Don't be so unhappy—it may be better than we fear.' But the last words, instead of ringing clear and true, as consolation should, died faintly on her lips.

Something was done, however. Miss Crawford was put on the sofa, and had a glass of wine, while Judith sent a telegram in her name to Mr. Nash. But the poor old lady could not rest for a moment. She pulled herself up by the help of the back of the couch, and sitting there, with her ghastly face surmounted by a crushed and woebegone cap, she went over the same old questions, and doubts, and fears, again and again. Judith answered her as well as she could, and persuaded her to lie down once more. But in another moment she was up again.

'Judith — I want you! Come here! Come quite close!'

'Here I am, dear Miss Crawford. What is it?'

The old lady looked fixedly at the kneeling figure before her. 'I've nobody but you, my dear, she said. 'You are a little like your mamma sometimes.'

'Am I?' said Judith. 'So much the better. Perhaps it will make you feel as if I could help you.'

'You are not like her to-day. Your eyes are so sad and strange.' Judith tried to smile. 'Your brother, Mr. Herbert, is more like her. I noticed it when he was here last. She had just that bright happy look.'

'I don't remember that,' Judith answered. (One recollected the schoolgirl, and one the wife.)

'And that sweet smile—Mr. Herbert has that too. One could see how good she was. But I did'nt mean to talk about that. There is something—I shan't be easy till I have told some one.'

'Tell me, my dear,' said Judith.

The schoolmistress looked anxiously round. 'I may be mistaken—I hope I am—but do you know, dear, I doubt I'm not quite so wakeful as I ought to be. You wouldn't notice it, of course, because it is when I am alone, or as good as alone. But sometimes—just now and then, you know—when I have been with the girls while they took their lessons from the masters, the time has seemed to go so very fast. I should really have thought they had'nt drawn a line, when the drawing-master has said, 'That will do for to-day, young ladies,' and none of them seemed surprised. And once or twice I really haven't been *quite* sure what they have

been practising with Mr. Herbert. But music is so very soothing, isn't it?'

Judith held her breath in terror. And yet would it not be better if that horrible thought came to Miss Crawford too? If others attacked him, his sister might defend. Nevertheless, she drew a long sigh of relief when the old lady went on, as if confessing a crime of far deeper dye.

'And in church—it isn't easy to keep awake sometimes, one has heard the service so often, and the sermons seem so very much alike. Suppose some unprincipled young man——'

'Dear Miss Crawford, no one can wonder if you are drowsy now and then. You are always so busy, it is only natural.'

'But it isn't right.' And, with the quick tears gathering in her eyes, 'I ought to have owned it before. Only I have tried so hard to keep awake.'

'I know you have.' Miss Crawford drew one of her hands from Judith's clasp to find her handkerchief, and then laid her head on the girl's shoulder, and sobbed.

'If it has happened so,' she said;—'if it has been my carelessness that has done it, I shall never forgive myself. Never. For I can never say that I didn't suspect myself of

being unfit. It will break my heart. I have been so proud to think that I had never failed any one who trusted me. And now—a poor motherless girl who was to be my especial care, who had no one but me to care for her—O Judith, what has become of her?'

There was silence for a minute. How could Judith answer her?

'I can never say I didn't doubt myself; but it was only a doubt. And how could I give up with so many depending on me?'

'Wait till we know something more,' Judith pleaded. 'Wait till we hear what Mr. Nash says, in answer to your message. I am sure you have tried to act for the best.'

'I shall never hold up my head again,' said Miss Crawford, and laid it feebly down, as if she were tired out.

The telegram came. Emmeline had not been heard of, and Mr. Nash would be at Brenthill that afternoon.

Judith searched the little room which the schoolgirl had occupied, but no indication of her intention to fly was to be found. She dared not question the servants before Mr. Nash's arrival. Secrecy might be important, and there would be an end to all hope of secrecy if once suspicion were aroused.

'There's nothing to do but to wait,' she

said, coming down to Miss Crawford. 'I think, if you don't mind, I'll go home for an hour or so.'

'No, no, no! Don t go!'

'I must,' said Judith. 'I shall not be long.'

'You will!'

'No. An hour and a half—two hours at the utmost.'

'Oh, I understand!' said Miss Crawford. 'You will never come back.'

'Never come back? I will promise you, if you like, that I will be here again by half-past two—that is, if I go now.'

'Oh, of course. I can't keep you! If you will go, you will. But I think it is very cruel of you! You will leave me to face Mr. Nash alone.'

'Indeed I will not,' the girl replied.

'And after all, it is not half so bad for you as for me. He can't blame you. It will kill me, I think, but he can't say anything to you. O Judith, I'm only a stupid old woman; but I have meant to be kind to you.'

'No one could have been kinder!' said Judith. 'Miss Crawford, whatever happens, believe me, I am grateful.'

'Then you will stop—you will stop? He can't say anything to you, my dear.'

Judith was cold with terror at the thought of what Mr. Nash might have to say to her. At the same moment she was burning with anxiety to get to Bellevue Street and find some letter from Bertie. She freed her hands gently but firmly. Miss Crawford sank back in mute despair, as if she had received her death wound.

'Listen to me,' said Judith. 'I *must* go, but I will come back. I would swear it—only I don't quite know how people swear,' she added with a tremulous little laugh. 'Dear Miss Crawford, you trusted mamma. As surely as I am her daughter, you may trust me. Won't you trust me, dear?'

'I'll try,' said the old lady. 'But why must you go?'

'I must, really.'

'It won't be so bad for you—he can't blame you,' Miss Crawford reiterated, drearily pleading. 'Judith, no one ever had the heart to be so cruel as you will be if you don't come back.'

'But I will,' said Judith. She made her escape, and met Percival Thorne on her way to Bellevue Street.

'And now, what is to be done?' she asked, looking up at him when she had told him all. 'No letter—no sign of Bertie!'

13

Percival might not be very ready with expedients, but his calmness and reserve gave an impression of greater resources than he actually possessed. He hesitated while Judith spoke, but he did not show it. There was a pause, during which he caught at an idea, and uttered it without a trace of indecision.

'I'll look up Gordon,' he said, glancing at his watch. 'If Gordon told Bertie of this situation, he may be able to tell us where a telegram would find him. Perhaps he may explain this mysterious little note. If we can satisfactorily account for his absence, we shall have nothing to say about Bertie, except to justify him if any one else should bring his name into the affair. And you could do your best to help Mr. Nash and Miss Crawford in their search.'

'Yes—but where will you find Mr. Gordon?'

'He's a clerk at a factory in Hill Street. I will go at once.' And he hurried off.

Judith went to the window, and looked after him with a despairing sense of loneliness in her heart. The little maid asked her if the dinner should be brought in, and she answered in a tone that she hoped was cheerful.

Miss Bryant came in with a dish, and set it on the table. She seldom helped in this way, and Judith divined the motive. Con-

scious that she was narrowly scanned, she tried to assume a careless air, and turned away, so that the light should not fall on her face. But Lydia said nothing. She looked at Judith doubtfully, curiously, anxiously; her lips parted, but no word came. Judith began to eat as if in defiance. Lydia hesitated on the threshold, and then went away.

'Stuck up thing!' she exclaimed, as soon as she was safe in the passage. 'But what has he been doing? Oh, I must and will know!'

Percival returned before Judith's time had expired, and came into the room with a grave face, and eyes that would not meet hers.

'Tell me,' she said.

He turned away, and studied a coloured lithograph on the wall. 'It wasn't true,' he said. 'Gordon was at the last practising, but he never said a word about this organist's situation. In fact, Bertie left before the choir separated.'

'Some one else might have told him,' said Judith.

There was a pause. 'I fear not,' said Percival, intently examining a very blue church spire in one corner of the picture. 'In fact, Miss Lisle, I don't see how anyone could. There is no vacancy for an organist there—no

prospect of any vacancy. I ascertained that.' Another pause, a much longer one. Percival had turned away from the lithograph, but he was now looking at a threadbare place in the carpet, as thoughtfully as if he would have to pay for a new one. He touched it lightly with his foot, and perceived that it would soon wear into a hole.

'I must go back to Miss Crawford,' said Judith, suddenly. He bent his head in silent acquiescence.

'What am I to tell her?' She lifted a book from the table, and laid it down again with a quivering hand. 'Oh, it is too cruel!' she said in a low voice. 'No one could expect it of me. My own brother!'

'That's true. No one could expect it.'

'And yet,' said Judith. 'Miss Crawford—Emmeline. Oh Mr. Thorne, tell me what I ought to do!'

'How can I? I don't know what to say. Why do you attempt to decide now? You may safely leave it till the time comes.'

'Safely?'

'You will not do less than your duty.'

She hesitated, having a woman's craving for something to which she might cling, something definite and settled. 'It is not certain,' she said at last.

'No,' he answered. 'Bertie has deceived you, but it may be for some foolish scheme of his own. He may be guiltless of this—it is only a suspicion still.'

'Well, I will go,' said Judith again. 'Oh, if only he had come home!'

'There is a choir practice to-night,' said Percival. 'If all is well, he will be back in time for that. They have no doubt of his coming. Why not leave a note?'

She took a sheet of paper and wrote on it:—

'My dearest brother." ('If he comes back he will be best and dearest,' she thought, as she wrote. It had come to this, that it was necessary to justify the loving words! 'If he comes back—Oh, how shall I ever atone to him?')

'Come to me at once at Standon Square. Do not lose a moment, I entreat you.

'Yours always,

'JUDITH.'

She folded and addressed it, and laid it where he could not fail to see it as he came in. Then, having put on her hat, she turned to go.

'Let me walk with you,' said Percival. Lydia met them on the stairs, and cast a look of scornful anger on Miss Lisle. 'Much she

cares!' the girl muttered. '*He* doesn't come back, but she can go walking about with her young man. Those two won't miss him much.'

Thorne saw his companion safely to Standon Square, and then went to the office. He was late, a thing which had never happened before, and, though he did his best to make up for lost time, he failed signally. His thoughts wandered from his work to dwell on Judith Lisle, and, if truth be confessed, on the dinner, which he had forgotten while with her. He was tired and faint. The lines seemed to swim before his eyes, and he hardly grasped the sense of what he wrote. Once he awoke from a reverie, and found himself staring blankly at an ink-spot on the dingy desk. The young clerk on his right was watching him with a look of curiosity, in which there was as much malevolence as his feeble features could express, and when Thorne met his eyes he turned away with an unpleasant smile. It seemed as if six o'clock would never come; but it struck at last, and Percival escaped, and made his way to Bellevue Street.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RESULT OF PERCIVAL'S ECONOMY.

JUDITH'S letter lay on the table still. Bertie had not come to claim it, and she had not come home.

Having ascertained these facts, Percival went to his own room, and finding his tea set ready for him, he ate and drank hurriedly, hesitating whether he should go and meet her. Standing by the window, he looked out on the darkening street. All vulgarity of detail was lost in the softening dusk, and there was something almost picturesque in the opposite roof, whose outline was delicately drawn on the pale blue sky. Everything was refined, subdued, and shadowy in the tender light; but Percival, gazing, saw no charm in the little twilight picture. Sorrow may be soothed by quiet loveliness; but perplexities absorb all our faculties, and we do not heed the beauty of the world, which is simple and unperplexed. If it is forced upon

our notice, the contrast irritates us; it is almost an impertinence. Percival would have been angry had he been called upon to feel the poetry which Bertie had found, only a few days before, in the bit of houseleek growing on that arid waste of tiles. It is true that, in that dim light, the houseleek was only a dusky little knob.

Should he go and meet Judith? Should he wait for her? What would she do? Should he go to St. Sylvester's? By the time he could reach the Church the choristers would have assembled—would the organist be there? While he doubted what to do, his fingers were in his waistcoat pocket, and he incidentally discovered that he had only a shilling and a threepenny piece in it. He went quickly to the table and struck a light. Since he had enrolled himself as Judith Lisle's true knight, ready to go anywhere or render her any service in her need, it would be as well to be better provided with the sinews of war. He unlocked the little writing-case, which stood on a side table.

Percival's carefulness in money matters had helped him very much in his poverty. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to him, that, since his income was fixed, his expenditure must be made to fit it. He

hardly understood the difficulties of that numerous class, of which Bertie was an example, men who consider certain items of expenditure as fixed and unchangeable, let their income be what it may. But Percival had retained one remembrance of his wealthier days, a familiarity with money. People who have been stinted all their lives are accustomed to handle silver and copper, but are anxious about gold, and frightened at notes or cheques. Percival, though he was quite conscious of the relative greatness of small sums to his narrow means, retained the old habit of thinking them small, and never bestowed an anxious thought on the little hoard in his desk. As he went to it that evening he remembered, with sudden pleasure, that there was the money that had been accumulating for some time, in readiness for Mrs. Bryant's return. He could borrow from that, if need were.

The money was gone!

Percival stood up, and stared vaguely round the room. Then, unable to believe in his misfortune, he emptied out the contents of the desk upon the table, and tossed them over in a hurried search. A carelessly folded paper caught his eye, as something unfamiliar. He opened it, and read :—

'DEAR THORNE,

'You were good enough to let me borrow of you once, when I was in a scrape. I am in a worse difficulty now; and, as I have not the chance of asking your leave, I've ventured to help myself. You shall have it back again in a few days, with an explanation of this cool proceeding.

'H. L.'

Percival threw the letter down, and walked to the window again. It was clear enough now. Bertie had had no need to borrow eight or nine pounds, if he were only going out for the day to inquire about a situation as organist. But if a man is running off with a young lady, it would not do to have an absolutely empty purse. Even though she may be an heiress, he cannot very well begin by asking her to pay his railway fare, 'It would define the relative positions a little *too* clearly,' thought Percival, with a scornful smile.

'Will she hope still?' was his next thought. 'It is not utterly impossible, I suppose, that Master Bertie has bolted alone. One couldn't swear he hadn't. Bolted he certainly has; but if she *will* hope, I can't say that I know he has gone with Miss Nash.

Though I am sure he has—how else would he undertake to repay me in a few days? Unless that is only a figure of speech.'

He suddenly remembered the time when Bertie left his debt unpaid, after a similar promise, and he went back to his desk with a new anxiety. His talisman, the half-sovereign which was to have been treasured to his dying day, had shared the fate of the common-place coins which were destined for Mrs. Bryant and his bootmaker. It was a cruel blow, but Percival saw the absurd side of his misfortune, and laughed aloud in spite of himself.

'My sentiment hasn't prospered. It might just as well have been a threepenny-piece! Ah, well! it would be unreasonable to complain,' he reflected, 'since Bertie has promised to send my *souvenir* back again. Very thoughtful of him! It will be a little remembrance of Emmeline Nash, when it comes, and not of Judith Lisle; that will be the only difference. Quite unimportant, of course. Upon my word, Lisle went about it in a systematic fashion. Pity he gave his attention to music; a distinguished burglar was lost to society when he turned organist.' He took up the paper, and glanced at it again. 'If I show this to her, she will pay his debt,

as she did last time—and that she never shall do!' He doubled it up, and thrust it in with the rest.

A shuffling step in the passage, a knock at the door, and Emma made her appearance. 'Miss Lisle has come in, sir.'

Percival looked up a little astonished, but he only thanked her in his quiet voice, and closed his desk. He turned the key, and waited a moment till Emma should have gone, before he obeyed the summons. When, answering Judith's 'Come in,' he entered the Lisles' room, he found her standing by the window. She turned and looked at him, as if she were not quite certain whom to expect.

'It is I,' he said. 'Thank you for sending for me.'

'Sending for you? I didn't send. But I am glad you came,' she added.

She had not sent for him, and Percival remembered that he had passed Lydia Bryant on his way. The message, which after all was a mere statement of a fact, was hers. He coloured angrily, and stood confused.

'You did not send? No—I see. I beg your pardon—I misunderstood——'

'It makes no difference,' said Judith, quickly. 'Don't go. I wanted to tell you——'

She paused. 'I have not been unjust, Mr. Thorne. Mr. Nash has been at Standon Square this afternoon. After he had my telegram, he received a letter from Emmeline, and it was as I thought. She is with Bertie.'

'With Bertie? And he came here?'

'Yes; to see if it was as Emmeline said, that they were married at St. Andrew's, last Tuesday.'

Percival looked blankly at her. 'Married! It isn't possible, is it?'

'Quite possible,' said Judith, bitterly. 'Standon Square is in St. Andrew's parish, as well as Bellevue Street. It seems that Bertie had only to have the banns mumbled over for three Sundays, by an old clergyman whom nobody hears, in a church where nobody goes. It sounds very easy, doesn't it?'

Percival stood for a moment speechless, while the cool audacity of Bertie's proceeding filtered slowly into his mind. 'But if any one had gone to St. Andrew's?' he said at last.

'That would have ended it, of course. I suppose he would have run away with Emmeline. If I had gone that Sunday, when I had arranged to go, for instance. Yes, that would have been very awkward, wouldn't it, Mr. Thorne? Only you see Bertie happened

to be ill that morning, and I couldn't leave him. You remember, you were good enough to go to church with us.'

'I remember,' said Percival, with a scornful smile, as he recalled the devoted attention with which he had escorted the young organist to St. Sylvester's.

'He must have enjoyed that walk, I should think,' said Judith, still very quietly. Her unopened note was on the table, where she had placed it that morning. She took it up, and tore it into a hundred pieces.

'You have heard people talk of broken hearts, haven't you?' she said.

'Often,' he answered.

'Well then, Bertie has broken Miss Crawford's. She said this morning that she should never hold up her head again if this were true, and I believe she never will.'

'Do you mean she will die of it?' said Thorne, aghast.

'Not directly, perhaps; but I am sure she will die the sooner for it. All her pride in her life's work is gone. She feels that she is disgraced. I could not bear to see her this afternoon, utterly ashamed and humble before that man.'

'What did he say?'

'Some things I won't tell you.' A quick

blush dyed her face. 'Naturally he was angry, he had good reason to be. And when he told her she was past her work, she moaned, poor thing, while the tears rained down her cheeks, and only said "God forgive me—yes."'

Percival could but echo her pity. 'Bertie never thought——,' he began.

'Never thought! When our trouble came,' said Judith, 'we had plenty of friends better able to do something for us, but, somehow, they didn't. And when there was the talk of Bertie's coming here, and I remembered her, and asked her if she could help me to a situation anywhere in the neighbourhood, she wrote to me to come to her at once, and she would do all she could to help Bertie too. I have her letter still. She said she longed to know me for my mother's sake, and was sure she should soon love me for my own. And this afternoon she prayed God she might never see my face again!'

'She thinks you are to blame, then?' said Thorne.

'Yes; and am I not?' was the quick reply. 'Ought I not to have known Bertie better? And I did know him. That is the worst of it. I did not expect this, and yet

I ought to have been on my guard. He has been my one study from first to last. From the time that he was a little boy—the bonniest little boy that ever was!—my life has been all Bertie. I remember him, with long curls hanging down his back, and his grey eyes opened wide, when he stood on tiptoe at the piano, and touched the little tunes that he had heard, and looked over his shoulder at me, and laughed for pleasure in his music. I can see his little baby fingers—the little soft fingers I used to kiss—on the keys now. Oh, Bertie! why didn't you die then?'

She stopped, as if checked by a sudden thought, and looked so quickly up at Percival, that she caught an answer in his eyes that he would never have uttered.

'Ah, yes, he would have been the same,' she said. 'He *was* the same then; I know it. They used to praise me, when I was a child, for giving everything up to Bertie, as if he were not my happiness. And it has been so always. And now I have sacrificed Miss Crawford to Bertie—my dear old friend—my mother's friend—who is worth ten times as much as Bertie ever was, or ever will be! Is not this a fine ending of all?'

Percival broke the silence after a moment's pause. '*Is* it an ending of all?' he said.

'Bertie has been very wrong, but it has been partly thoughtlessness. He is very young, and if he should do well hereafter, may there not even yet be a future to which you may look forward? As for the world, it is not disposed to look on a runaway match of this sort as a crime.'

She turned her eyes full upon him, and he stopped.

'Oh, the world!' she said. 'The world will consider it a sort of young Lochinvar affair, no doubt. But how much of the young Lochinvar do you think there is about Bertie, Mr. Thorne? You have heard him speak of Emmeline Nash sometimes—not as often nor as freely as he has spoken to me—still, you have heard him. And judging from that, do you really believe that he is in love with her?'

'Well—no,' said Thorne, reluctantly. 'Hardly that.'

'A thousand times No! If by any possibility he had loved her, foolishly, madly, with a passion that blinded him to the cruel wrong he was doing, it would all have been different. I should have blamed him, but in spite of Miss Crawford I should have forgiven him; I should have had hope, he would have been my Bertie still; I should not have

despised him. But this is cold, and base, and horrible—he has simply sold himself for Emmeline's money. Sold himself—his smiles and his pretty speeches, and his handsome face. And now it is all over.'

As Judith spoke, Percival understood for the first time what a woman's voice could be. The girl's soul was filled and shaken with passion. She did not cry aloud, nor rant, but every accent thrilled through him from head to foot. And it seemed to him that she needed no words; that, had she been speaking in an unknown tongue, the very intonation, the mere sound, the vibration of her voice, would have told him of her wounded heart, her despair, her unavailing sorrow, her bitter shame—so eloquent it was. He did not think all this, but, in a passing moment, felt it.

'I fear it is all too true,' he said. 'I don't know what to say, nor how to help you. Your brother——'

'Don't call him that—he is no brother of mine. Ah, yes! God help me, he *is* my brother; and I think we Lisles bring sorrow to all who are good to us. We have to you, have we not? Don't stay here, Mr. Thorne; don't try to help me. Remember that I am of the same blood as my father, who robbed you—as Bertie, who has been so base.'

'And if Judas himself were your brother —what then?' Percival demanded. His voice, in its masculine vigour and fullness, broke forth suddenly, like a strong creature held till then in a leash. 'And as for the money—what of that? I am glad it is gone, or I should not have been here to-day!'

No; he would not have needed to turn clerk, and earn his living. He would not have gone to Brackenhill to confess his poverty. He might never have discovered anything. Most likely he would long since have been Sissy's husband. Sissy seemed far away now. He had loved her—yes. Oh, poor little Sissy, who had clung to him! But what were these new feelings that thronged his heart as he looked at Judith Lisle? He stopped abruptly. What had he said?

Judith, too, looked at him, and grew suddenly calm and still. 'You are very good,' she said. 'I should have been very lonely to-day, if I had not had a friend. It has been a comfort to speak out what I felt, though I'm afraid I've talked foolishly——'

'One can't weigh all one's words,' said Percival.

'No,' she answered; 'and I know you will not remember my folly.'

'At any rate, I will not forget that you have trusted me. You are tired,' he said, gently; 'you ought to rest. There is nothing to be done to-night.'

'Nothing,' she answered, hopelessly.

'And to-morrow, if there is anything that I can do, you will send for me—will you not?'

She smiled.

'Promise me that,' he urged, in a tone of authority. 'You will?'

'Yes—I promise.'

Sometimes, when clouds roll up, black with thunder and rain, to overshadow the heavens, and to deluge the earth, between their masses you may catch a momentary gleam of blue, faint and infinitely far away, deep, untroubled, most beautiful. Judith had caught such a glimpse that evening, as she bade Percival good-night.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONSEQUENCES.

THE story of the elopement was in all the local papers, which seemed for once to be printed on Judith Lisle's heart. It was the latest and most exciting topic of conversation in the neighbourhood of Standon Square and St. Sylvester's, and was made doubly interesting by the utter collapse of Mr. Clifton's Easter services, which were to have been something very remarkable indeed. Everyone recollected the young organist, who was so handsome, and who played so divinely. People forgot that his father had failed very disgracefully, and only remembered that Bertie had once been in a much better position. There was a sort of general impression that he was an aristocratic young hero, who lived in lofty poverty, and was a genius into the bargain. No one was very precise about it, but Beethoven and Mendelssohn,

and all those people were likely to find themselves eclipsed some fine morning. Emmeline Nash, of course, became a heroine to match, vaguely sketched as slim, tall, and fair. She had stayed on at Miss Crawford's at an age when a girl's education is generally supposed to be finished, and she had not always gone home for the holidays. These facts were of course the germs of a romance. There was a quarrel with her father, who wished her to marry Some One. No one knew who the some one might be; but as he was only a shadowy figure in the background, his name was of no importance. Emmeline and her music-master had fallen in love at first sight; and, when the moment came for the girl to return home, to be persecuted by her father's threats, and by the attentions of the shadowy lover, her heart had failed her, and she had consented to fly with the young musician. As Judith had said, it was a young Lochinvar romance—a boy and girl attachment. No one seemed to think much the worse of Bertie. Hardly anyone called him a fortune-hunter, for Emmeline's money seemed trivial compared with the wealth that he was supposed to have once possessed. And no one thought anything at all of Judith herself or of Miss Crawford.

It would soon be over and forgotten, but Judith suffered acutely while it lasted. Perhaps it was well that she was forced to think about her own prospects, which were none of the brightest.

'Shall you go to Rookleigh?' Percival asked her a couple of days later.

She shook her head. 'No; I'm too proud, I suppose, or too miserable. I can't have my failure here talked over. Aunt Lisle's conversation is full of sharp little pin-pricks, which are all very well when they don't go straight into one's heart.'

He saw her lip quiver, as she turned her face away. 'Where will you go, then?' he asked, with gentle persistence. It was partly on his own account, for he feared that a blow was in store for him, and he wanted to know the worst.

'I shall not go anywhere. I shall not leave Brenthill.'

The blood seemed to rush strongly to his heart; his veins were full of warm life. She would not leave Brenthill.

'I will stay, at any rate, while Miss Crawford remains here. She will not speak to me; she has forbidden me to attempt to see her; but I cannot go away, and leave her here alone. I may not be of any use—I do

not suppose I shall be—but while she is here I will not go.'

'But if she left?'

'Still I would not leave Brenthill if I could get any work to do. I feel as if I must stay here, if only to show that I have not gone away with Bertie, to live on Emmeline's money. Poor Emmeline! And when he used to talk of my not working any more, and he would provide for me, I thought he meant that he would make a fortune with his opera. What a fool I was!'

'It was a folly to be proud of.'

He was rewarded with a faint smile; but the delicate curve of the girl's lips relaxed into sadness all too soon.

The table at her side was strewn with sheets of roughly blotted music, mixed with others, daintily neat, which Judith herself had copied. 'His opera,' she repeated, laying the leaves in order. 'Emmeline will be promoted to the office of critic and admirer now, I suppose. But I think the admiration will be too indiscriminate even for Bertie. Poor Emmeline!'

'What are you going to do with all these?' said Thorne, laying his hand on the papers.

'I am putting them together to send to him. I had a letter this morning, so I know his address now. He seems very hopeful, as usual, and thinks her father will forgive them before long.'

'And do you think there is a chance of it?'

'No, I don't. Bertie did not hear what Mr. Nash said that afternoon to Miss Crawford and to me,' she replied; and once again the colour rushed to her face at the remembrance.

'Miss Lisle!' said Percival suddenly, 'I am ready to make every allowance for Mr. Nash; but if——'

'Oh, it was nothing! He was angry, as he had reason to be, that was all. And you see I am not used to angry men.'

'I should hope not. I wish I had been there!'

'And I don't,' said Judith softly. 'I think you might not have been very patient, and I felt that one ought to be patient for Miss Crawford's sake. Besides, if you had been there I could not have—— Bertie writes in capital spirits,' she continued, with a sudden change of tone. 'He wants me to go and join them. He is just the same as ever, only rather proud of himself.'

'Proud of himself! In heaven's name, why?'

'Why, he is only two-and-twenty, and has secured a comfortable income for the rest of his life by his own exertions. Naturally he is proud of himself.' Percival had learned now that Judith never suffered more keenly than when she spoke of Bertie in a jesting tone, and it pained him for her sake. He looked sorrowfully at her. 'Mr. Thorne,' she went on, 'he does not even suspect that what he has done is anything but praiseworthy, and rather clever. He does not so much as mention Miss Crawford. And I am haunted by a feeling that we have somehow wronged my mother—wronging her old friend.'

Percival did not tell her that he too had had a letter from Bertie. It was in his pocket as he stood there, and when he went away he took it out and read it again.

Bertie was as light-hearted as she had said. He enclosed an order for the money taken from the desk, and hoped Thorne had not wanted it; or, if he had been put to any inconvenience, he must forgive him this once, as he, Lisle, did not suppose he should ever run away in that style again.

'I think the old man will come round without much fuss,' Bertie went on. 'We have

been very penitent—the waste of note-paper before we could get our feelings properly expressed was something frightful; but the money was well laid out, for we have heard from him again, and there is a perceptible softening in the tone of his letter. Emmeline assures me that he is passionately fond of music, and reminds me how anxious he was that she should learn to play. The reasoning does not exactly convince me; but if the old fellow does but imagine that he has a passion for music, I will conquer him through that. And if the worst comes to the worst, and he is as stony-hearted as one of his own fossils, we have only to manage for this year, and we must come into our money when Emmeline is twenty-one. But I have no fear. He will relent, and we shall be comfortably settled under the paternal roof long before Christmas.

'What did old Clifton say and do when he found I had bolted? And how did the Easter services go off? Those blessed Easter services that he was in such a state of mind about! Was he very savage? Send me as graphic a description as you can.

'Excuse a smudge, but Emmeline and I are bound to do a good deal of hugging and kissing just now—a honeymoon after an

elopement is something remarkably sweet, as you may suppose—and her sleeve brushed the wet ink. This particular embrace was on the occasion of her departure to put on her things. We are going out.

'Don't they say that married women always give up their accomplishments? Emmeline is a married woman, therefore Emmeline will give up her music. How soon do you suppose she will begin?'

Half a page more of Bertie's random scribble brought him to a conclusion, but it was not a final one, for he had added a couple of lines. 'P.S. Persuade J. to shake herself free of Brenthill as soon as possible; there can be no need for her to work now, thank God! You know it has always been my day-dream, and hope, to provide for her. You must come and see us too. Come soon, before we go to my father-in-law's. Good-bye—we are off. P.S. No. 2. No, we are not. E. has forgotten her parasol, and has gone for it. How is Lydia? What did she say when she heard the news? I suppose by this time everybody knows it.'

Percival's lip curled with scorn and disgust as he refolded the letter, in which Emmeline, Judith, and Lydia jostled each other as they might have done in a bad dream.

Then he looked up, being suddenly aware of eyes that were fixed upon him. Miss Bryant stood in the doorway.

'You've heard from *him*, Mr. Thorne?'

Percival did not choose to answer as if he were in Miss Bryant's secrets, and knew as a matter of course that '*him*' meant Lisle. Neither did he choose to say that he did not know who was intended by the energetic pronoun. He looked back at Lydia politely and inquiringly, as if he awaited further information before he could be expected to reply.

'Oh, you know,' said Lydia scornfully. 'You have heard from Mr. Bertie Lisle?'

'Yes,' Percival acquiesced, gravely.

'Well?'

'Well—what, Miss Bryant?'

'What does he say?' Lydia demanded; and when Thorne arched his brows, 'Oh, you needn't look as if you thought it wasn't my business. I've a right to ask after him, at any rate, for old acquaintance sake.'

'I'm sorry to hear you take so much interest in him,' he rejoined.

'Why? You may keep your sorrow for your own affairs—I'll manage mine. I can take very good care of myself, I assure you, and I won't trouble you to be sorry for me,' said

Lydia, shortly. I do not think she had ever spoken to a young man before, and been unconscious that it *was* a young man to whom she spoke. But she was utterly heedless of Percival as she questioned him, and he perceived it, and preferred this angry mood. 'Can't you tell me anything about him?' said the girl. Is he well—happy?'

'He writes in the best of spirits.'

Lydia advanced a step or two. 'And is it all true what they are saying? He has married this young lady?'

'Yes, he has married her.'

'And do you suppose he cares for her?' said Lydia, slowly.

Thorne's brows went up again. 'Really, Miss Bryant——'

'Because, if he does, he has told lies enough—that's all.'

('And he isn't a miracle of honour, if he doesn't,' said Percival.)

'But that's quite likely,' Lydia went on, unheeding. 'I knew all the time that he didn't mean any good. He thought I believed him, but I didn't—not more than half, anyhow. But when he went away, I didn't guess it was for this.'

'You knew he was going?' said Thorne.

Lydia half smiled, in conscious superiority.

'You don't seem to have served yourself particularly well by keeping his secrets. You are deceived at last, like the rest.'

'Well, if I haven't served myself, I've served him,' said Lydia. 'And I don't know but what I am glad of it. He wasn't as stuck up and proud as some people. One likes to be looked at, and spoken to, as if one wasn't dirt under people's feet. And, after all, I don't see there's any harm done.' There were red rims to Lydia's eyes, telling of tears which must surely have been too persistent to pass for tears of joy at the tidings of Bertie's elopement. 'I suppose a marriage like that is all right?' she asked, with a quick glance.

'Of course—no doubt of it,' said Percival very shortly. He had pitied her a moment earlier.

'Ah! I supposed so. But things ain't always all right when people run away. And the money's all right too, is it?'

'Some of it, at any rate,' said Thorne, taking a book from the table.

'Wouldn't he be sure to take care of that! And there's more to come, if the father likes, isn't there? He'll get that too—see if he doesn't.'

'It is to be hoped he will—for Mrs.

Lisle's sake. Otherwise, I cannot say I care to discuss his prospects.'

'Well,' said Lydia after a pause, during which she turned a ring slowly on her finger. 'Well—I'll wish him all the happiness he deserves.'

Percival's lip curved a little. 'Miss Bryant, are you absolutely pitiless?'

Lydia's expression was rather blank. 'What do you mean? No, I ain't,' she said. 'I've nothing more to do with him. He hasn't done me any harm, and I won't wish him any. At least—only a little!' With which small ebullition of feminine tenderness and spite, she fled hurriedly downstairs to shed a few more tears, and left Thorne to write his letter to Lisle. It was brief, and none the sweeter for that recent interview.

'I return the money,' Percival wrote, 'which you say was so useful to you. I know that what you have sent me is not yours, but your wife's, and I cannot conscientiously say that I think Mrs. Herbert Lisle is indebted to me in any way.

'I have not delivered your message to your sister. I have no wish to insult her in her trouble, and I know she would feel such persuasion a cruel insult, as indeed I think it would be.'

Judith, at the same time, was writing.

'From this time our paths must lie apart. I will never touch a penny of your wife's money. Do not dare to offer me a share of it again. It seems to me that all the shame and sorrow is mine, and you have only the prosperity. Not for the whole world would I change burdens with you.

'Miss Crawford is going to give up her school at once. She will not see or speak to me, for she suspects me of having been your accomplice. And I cannot help blaming myself that I trusted you so foolishly. But I could not have believed that you would have been false to her—our one friend—our mother's friend. Is it possible that you do not see that everyone under her roof should have been sacred to you? But what is the use of saying anything now?

'I don't know, after this, how to appeal to you, and I don't want any promises; but if you feel any regret for the pain you have caused, and if you really wish to do anything for me, I entreat you, be good to Emmeline. It is the only favour I will ever ask of you. She is young and weak—poor girl—and she has trusted you utterly. In God's name, do not repay her trust as you have repaid Miss Crawford's and mine!'

Bertie's incredulous amazement was visible in every line of his answer to Percival.

'Are you both cracked—you and Judith—or am I dreaming? I have read your letters a score of times, and I think I understand them less than I did. Here are sweet bells jangled out of tune with a vengeance, and Heaven only knows what all the row is about—I don't.

'Do you suppose a man never made a runaway match before? And how could I do otherwise than as I did? Was I to stop and consult all the old women in the parish about it—ask Miss Crawford's blessing, and get my sister to look out my train for me, and pack my portmanteau? Can't you see that I was obliged to deceive you a little?

'And what is amiss with the marriage itself? It is true that just now Emmeline has the money and I have none, but do you suppose I am going to remain in obscurity all my life? A few years hence you shall own that it was not at all a bad match for her. Old Nash is nobody, though he is clever enough in his own way. His father was a tailor, and made a good lot of money so. By the way, he is certainly coming round (Mr. Nash, I mean, not my grand father-in-law, the tailor—he is dead), and if he doesn't object, why should anybody else?

'If I have done Miss Crawford any harm, I'm very sorry of course. Can't I help her in some way?'

The reply to Judith's letter came in a feeble, girlish handwriting. It began: 'Herbert tells me you are angry with him because he deceived you about our marriage,' and it ended 'Your affectionate sister, Emmeline Lisle.' The writer was evidently in the seventh heaven of bliss. Her letter was an attempt at persuading Judith; but it was sprinkled all over with fond allusions to Bertie —'My dear, dear husband,' 'my own dearest,' 'darlingest Herbert,' 'my own love,'— and in one place there was an unnecessary little parenthesis, 'he is such a *dear*, you know.' It was silly enough to be maddening, but it was wonderfully happy, with the writer's adoration of Bertie, and her serene certainty that Bertie adored her. Clearly no shadow of doubt had crossed Emmeline's mind. There was not such another man in all the world as Herbert Lisle, and she was his ideal woman. Every other girl must envy her the prize she had won. Even his sister was jealous and angry when she found that she held only the second place in his affections. Emmeline, elated by her proud position, reasoned sweetly with the unreasonable

Judith, who read the foolish scribble with mingled irritation, laughter, contempt, and almost tears. At the end were three lines in another hand.

'Judith, you *must* let me send you some money. If you don't understand why yet, you will soon. You really must.'

'Does he think I can't get a situation without his help?' Judith wondered. She smiled, for she had found one. Mrs. Barton had come to her assistance—Mrs. Barton, whose stupid little daughter Judith was still patiently teaching. She understood the girl's wish to remain at Brenthill; she believed in her, and sympathised with her, and exerted herself in her behalf. She brought her the offer of a situation in a school for little boys, where she would live in the house and have a small salary. 'It won't be like Miss Crawford's, you know,' the good lady said.

'It will do—whatever it is,' Judith answered.

'It is a school of quite a different class. Miss Macgregor is a woman who drives hard bargains. She will overwork you, I'm afraid—I only hope she won't underfeed you. You will certainly be underpaid. She takes advantage of the cause of your leaving Standon Square, and of the fact that you can't ask

Miss Crawford for testimonials. She is delighted at the idea of getting a really good teacher for next to nothing.'

'Still it is in Brenthill,' said Judith, 'and that is the great thing. Thank you very much, Mrs. Barton. I will take it.'

'She will reopen school in about ten days.'

'That will suit me very well—won't it? I must pack up here, and settle everything.' And Judith cast a desolate glance round the room, where she had come with such happy hopes, to begin a new life with Bertie.

Mrs. Barton's eyes were fixed on her. 'I am half inclined now to wish I hadn't said anything about Miss Macgregor at all,' she remarked.

'Why? If you only knew how grateful I am!'

'That's just it. Grateful! And that schoolmistress will work you to death, I know she will!'

'She must take a little time about it,' said the girl with a smile. 'Perhaps before she has quite finished, I may hear of something else. What I want is something to enable me to stay at Brenthill, and this will answer the purpose.'

Mrs. Barton stood up to go. 'I've made one stipulation,' she said. 'Miss Macgregor

will let you come to us every Wednesday afternoon to give Janie her lesson.'

'Oh, how good you are!' Judith exclaimed. 'I thought all that must be over.'

'I wish I could have you altogether,' Mrs. Barton said. 'It would be charming for Janie and for me too. But, unfortunately, that can't be.' She had her hand on the handle of the half-open door. As she spoke there was a quick step on the stairs, and Percival Thorne went by. A slanting light, from the window in the passage, fell on his sombre, olive-tinted face, with a curiously picturesque effect. An artist might have painted him, emerging thus from the dusky shadows. He carried himself with a defiant pride—was he not Judith's friend and champion?—and bowed, with a glance that was at once eager and earnest, when he caught sight of the young girl, behind her friend's substantial figure. His strongly marked courtesy was so evidently natural, that it could not strike anyone as an exaggeration of ordinary manners, but rather as the perfection of some other manners, no matter whether those of a nation, or a time, or only his own. Mrs. Barton was startled and interested by the sudden apparition. The good lady was romantic in her tastes, and this was like a glimpse of a

living novel. 'Who was that?' she asked, hurriedly.

'Mr. Thorne. He lodges here,' said Judith.

'A friend of your brother's?'

'He was very good to my brother.'

'Ah!' said Mrs. Barton. 'My dear, he is very handsome.'

Judith smiled.

'He is!' exclaimed her friend. 'Don't say he isn't, for I shan't believe you mean it. He is *very* handsome—like a Spaniard—like a cavalier—like some one in a tragedy. Now isn't he?'

Mrs. Barton's romantic feelings found no outlet in her daily round of household duties. Mr. Barton was good, but commonplace; so was Janie; and Mrs. Barton was quite conscious that there was nothing poetical or striking in her own appearance. But Miss Lisle, with her 'great, grave griefful air,' was fit to take a leading part in poem or drama, and here was a man, worthy to play hero, passing her on the staircase of a dingy lodging house. Mrs. Barton built up a romance in a moment, and was quite impatient to bid Judith farewell, that she might work out the details as she walked along the street.

The unconscious hero of her romance was divided between pleasure and regret, when

he heard of the treaty concluded with Miss Macgregor. It was much that Judith could remain at Brenthill; but one day, on his way to dinner, he went and looked at the outside of the house which was to be her home, and its aspect did not please him. It stood in a gloomy street; it was prim, straight, narrow, and altogether hideous. A tiny bit of arid garden in front gave it a prudish air of withdrawing from the life and traffic of the thoroughfare. The door opened as Percival looked, and a woman came out, frigid, thin-lipped, and sandy-haired. She paused on the step and gave an order to the servant—evidently she was Miss Macgregor. Percival's heart died within him. 'That harpy!' he said, under his breath. The door closed behind her, and there was a prison-like sound of making fast within. The young man turned and walked away, oppressed by a sense of grey dreariness. 'Will she be able to breathe in that jail?' he wondered to himself. 'Bellevue Street is a miserable hole, but at least one is free there.' He prolonged his walk a little, and went through Standon Square. It was bright and pleasant in the spring sunshine, and the trees in the garden had little leaves on every twig. A man was painting the railings of Montague House,

and another was putting a brass plate on the door. There was a new name on it; Miss Crawford's reign was over for ever.

Percival counted the days that still remained before Judith's bondage would begin, and Bellevue Street be desolate as of old. Yet, though he prized every hour, they were miserable days. Lydia Bryant haunted him, not with her former airs and graces, but with malicious hints in her speech, and little traps set for Miss Lisle and himself. She would gladly have found an occasion for slander, and Percival read her hate of Judith in the cunning eyes which watched them both. He felt that he had already been unwary, and his blood ran cold as he thought of possible gossip, and the manner in which Lydia's insinuations would be made. Precious as those few days were, he longed for the end. He thought more than once of leaving Bellevue Street, but such a flight was impossible. He was chained there by want of money. He could not pay his debt to Mrs. Bryant for weeks, and he could not leave while it was unpaid. Day after day he withdrew himself more, and grew almost cold in his reserve, hoping to escape from Lydia. One morning, as they passed on the stairs, he looked back and caught a glance from Judith,

never intended to meet his eye—a sad and wondering glance, which made his heart ache, even while filling it with the certainty that he was needed. He answered only with another glance. It seemed to him to convey nothing of what he felt, but nevertheless it woke a light in the girl's eyes. Moved by a quick impulse, Percival looked up, and following his example, Judith lifted her head, and saw Miss Bryant leaning over the bannisters and watching them with a curiosity which changed to an unpleasant smile, when she found herself observed. It was a revelation to Judith. She fled into her room, flushing hotly with indignation against Lydia for her spitefully suggestive watchfulness; with shame for herself, that Percival's sense of her danger should have been keener than her own, and with generous pride and confidence in him. Thus to have been guarded might have been an intolerable humiliation, but Judith found some sweetness even in the sting. It was something new to her to be cared for and shielded; and while she resolved to be more careful in future, her dominant feeling was of disgust at the curiosity which could so misunderstand the truest and purest of friendships. '*He* understands me, at any rate,' said poor Judith to herself, painfully conscious of her glowing

cheeks. '*He* understands me—he will not think ill of me—but he shall never have to fear for me again.' It might be questioned whether Percival did altogether understand her. If he did, he was more enlightened than Judith herself.

After that day she shrank from Percival, and they hardly saw each other till she left. She knew his hours of going and coming, and was careful to remain in her room, though it might be that the knowledge drew her to the window that looked into Bellevue Street. As for Percival, though he never sought her, it seemed to him that his sense of hearing was quickened. Judith's footstep on the stairs was always distinct to him, and the tone of her voice, if she spoke to Miss Bryant or Emma, was noted and remembered. It is true that this strained anxiety sometimes made him an involuntary listener to gossip, or household arrangements, in which Miss Lisle took no active part. One day there was a hurried conversation just outside his door.

'Did you give it to her?' said Lydia's voice.

Emma replied, 'Yes'm.'

'Open? Just as it came? Just as I gave it to you?'

Emma again replied, 'Yes'm.'

'Did she look surprised?'

'She gave a little jump, Miss,' said Emma deliberately, as if weighing her words, 'and she looked at it back and front.'

'Well, what then? Go on.'

'Oh! then she laid it down, and said it was quite right, and she'd see about it.'

Lydia laughed. 'I think there'll be some more——' she said. Percival threw the tongs into the fender, and the dialogue came to an abrupt termination. 'She,' who gave a little jump, was Miss Lisle, of course. But there would be some more —— what? The young man revolved the matter gloomily in his mind, as he paced to and fro within the narrow limits of his room. A natural impulse had caused him to interrupt Lydia's triumphant speech, which he knew was not intended for his ears, but her laugh rang in the air and mocked him. What was the torture that she had devised, and whose effects she so curiously analysed? There would be more —— what?

He thought of it that night, he thought of it the next morning, and still he could not solve the mystery. But, as he came from the office in the middle of the day, he passed his bootmaker's; and the worthy man, who was holding the door open for a customer to

go out, stopped him with an apology. Percival's heart beat fast; never before had he stood face to face with a tradesman, and felt that he could not pay him what he owed. His bill had not yet been sent in, and the man had never shown any inclination to hurry him, but he was evidently going to ask for his money now. Percival controlled his face with an effort, prepared for the humiliating confession of his poverty, and found that Mr. Robinson—with profuse excuses for the trouble he was giving—was begging to be told Mr. Lisle's address.

'Mr. Lisle's address?' Thorne repeated the words, but as he did so the matter suddenly became elear to him, and he went on easily: 'Oh, I ought to have told you that Mr. Lisle's account was to be sent to me. If you have it there, I'll take it.'

Mr. Robinson fetched it with more apologies. He was impressed by the lofty carelessness with which the young man thrust the paper into his pocket; and as Thorne went down the street, the little bootmaker looked after him with considerable admiration. 'Anyone can see he's quite the gentleman, and so was the other. This one'll make his way too, see if he doesn't!' Mr. Robinson imparted these opinions to Mrs. Robinson over

their dinner; and was informed in return that he wasn't a prophet, so he needn't think it! and the young men who gave themselves airs, and wore smart clothes, weren't the ones to get on in the world,—and Mrs. Robinson had no patience with such nonsense.

Meanwhile Percival had gone home with his riddle answered. More —— what? More unsuspected debts, more bills of Bertie's, to be sent in to the poor girl who had been so happy in the thought that, although their income was small, at least they owed nothing. Percival's heart ached as he pictured Judith's start of surprise when Emma carried in the open paper, her brave smile, her hurried assurance that it was all right, and Lydia laughing outside at the thought of more to come. 'She'll pay them all,' said Percival to himself. 'She won't take a farthing of that girl's money. She'll die sooner than not pay them; but I incline to think she won't pay this one.' His mind was made up long before he reached Bellevue Street. If by any sacrifice of pride or comfort he could keep the privilege of helping Judith altogether to himself, he would do so. If that were impossible, he would get the money from Godfrey Hammond. But he felt doubtful whether he should like Godfrey Hammond quite as well when

he should have asked and received this service at his hands. 'I ought to like him all the better if he helped her when I couldn't manage it. It would be abominably unjust if I didn't. In fact, I *must* like him all the better for it, it stands to reason I must. I'll be shot if I should, though! and I don't much think I could ever forgive him.'

Percival found that the debt was a small one, and calculated that by a miracle of economy he might pay it out of his salary at the end of the week. Consequently, he dined out two or three days. At least he did not dine at home; but his dissipation did not seem to agree with him, for he looked white and tired. Luckily, he had not to pay for his lodgings till Mrs. Bryant came back; and he sincerely hoped that the good lady would be happy with her sister Mrs. Smith, till his finances were in better order. When he got his money, he lost no time in settling Mr. Robinson's little account, and was fortunate enough to intercept another, about which Mr. Brett, the tailor, was growing seriously uneasy. He would not for the world have parted with the precious document; but he began to wonder how he should extricate himself from his growing embarrassments. Lydia—half suspicious, half laughing—made

a remark about his continual absence from home. 'You're getting to be very gay, ain't you, Mr. Thorne?' she said; and she pulled her curl with her old liveliness, and watched him while she spoke.

'Well—rather so—it does seem like it,' he allowed.

'I think you'll be getting too fine for Bellevue Street,' said the girl; 'I'm afraid we ain't scarcely smart enough for you already.'

Had she any idea how much he was in their power? Was this a taunt, or a chance shot?

'Oh no! I think not,' he said. 'You see, Miss Bryant, I'm used to Bellevue Street now. By the way, I shall dine out again to-morrow.'

'What? again to-morrow?' Lydia compressed her lips, and looked at him. 'Oh, very well—it is a fine thing to have friends make so much of one,' she said, as she turned to leave the room.

Percival came home late the next evening. As he passed Judith's sitting-room the door stood wide, and revealed its desolate emptiness. Was she gone, absolutely gone? And he had been out, and had never had a word of farewell from her. Perhaps she had looked for him in the middle of the day, and wondered

why he did not come. Downstairs he heard Lydia calling to the girl: 'Emma, didn't I tell you to put the "Lodgings" card up in the window, as soon as Miss Lisle was out of the house? It might just as well have been up before. What d'ye mean by leaving it lying here on the table? You're enough to provoke a saint—that you are! How d'ye know a score of people mayn't have been looking for lodgings to-day, and I daresay there won't be one to-morrow! If ever there was a lazy, good-for-nothing——' The violent slamming of the kitchen-door cut off the remainder of the discourse, but a shrill screaming voice might still be heard. Percival was certain that the tide of eloquence flowed on undiminished, though of articulate words he could distinguish none. It is to be feared that Emma was less fortunate.

It was true, then—Judith was gone! and that without a farewell look, or touch of the hand, to mark the day. They had lived for months under the same roof, and though days might pass without granting them a glimpse of each other, the possibility of a meeting was continually with them. It was only that night that Percival, sitting by his cheerless fireside, understood what that possibility had been to him. He consoled himself as well

as he could, for his ignorance of the hour of Judith's departure, by reflecting that Lydia would have followed her about with malicious watchfulness, and would either have played the spy at their interview, or invented a parting instead of that which she had not seen. 'She can't gossip now,' thought Percival.

Meanwhile Lydia perceived, beyond a doubt, that they must have arranged some way of meeting, since they had not taken the trouble to say 'Good-bye.'

CHAPTER IX.

ENGAGEMENTS—HOSTILE AND OTHERWISE.

THE fairest season of the year, the debatable ground between spring and summer, had come round once more. There were leaves on the trees, and flowers in the grass. The sunshine was golden and full, not like the bleak brightness of March. The winds were warm, the showers soft. Percival, always keenly affected by such influences, felt as if a new life had come to him with the spring. Now that the evenings had grown long and light, he could escape into the country, breathe a purer air, and wandér in fields and lanes. And as he wandered, musing, it seemed to him that he had awakened from a dream.

He looked back upon the past year, and he was more than half inclined to call himself a fool. He had taken up work for which he was not fit. He could see that now.

He knew very well that his life was almost intolerable, and that it would never be more tolerable unless help came from without. He could never grow accustomed to his drudgery. He could work honestly, but he could never put his heart into it. And even if he could have displayed ten times as much energy, if his aptitude for business had been ten times as great, if Mr. Ferguson had estimated him so highly as to take him as articled clerk, if he had passed all his examinations, and been duly admitted, if the brightest possibilities in such a life as his had become realities, and he had attained at last to a small share in the business,—what would be the end of this most improbable success? Merely that he would have to spend his whole life in Brenthill, absorbed in law. Now the law was a weariness to him, and he loathed Brenthill. Yet he had voluntarily accepted a life which could offer him no higher price than such a fate as this, when Godfrey Hammond, or Mrs. Middleton, or even old Hardwicke, would no doubt have helped him to something better.

Certainly he had been a fool! and yet, while he realised this truth, he sincerely respected—I might almost say he admired—his own folly. He had been sick of de-

pendence, and he had gone down at once to the bottom of everything, taken his stand on firm ground, and conquered independence for himself. He had gained the precious knowledge that he could earn his own living by the labour of his hands. He might have been a fool to reject the help that would have opened some higher and less distasteful career to him; yet, if he accepted it, he would never have known the extent of his own powers. He would have been a hermit-crab still, fitted with another shell by the kindness of his friends. Had he clearly understood what he was doing when he went to Brenthill, it was very likely that he might never have gone. He was almost glad that he had not understood.

And now, having conquered in the race, could he go back and ask for the help which he had once refused? Hardly. The life in which we first gain independence may be stern and ugly, the independence itself—when we gather in our harvest—may have a rough and bitter taste, yet it will spoil the palate for all other flavours. They will seem sickly sweet after its wholesome austerity. Neither did Percival feel any greater desire for a career of any kind, than he had felt a year earlier, when he talked over his future life with God-

frey Hammond. If he were asked what was his day-dream, his castle in the air, the utmost limit of his earthly wishes, he would answer now as he would have answered then, 'Brackenhill,' dismissing the impossible idea with a smile, even as he uttered it. Asked what would content him—since we can hardly hope to draw the highest prize in our life's lottery—he would answer now as then: to have an assured income sufficient to allow him to wander on the Continent, to see pictures, old towns, Alps, rivers, blue sky; wandering, to remain a foreigner all his life, so that there might always be something a little novel and curious about his food, and his manner of living (things which are apt to grow so hideously commonplace in the land where one is born); to drink the wine of the country, to read many poems in verse, in prose, in the scenery around; and through it all, from first to last, to 'dream deliciously.'

And yet, even while he felt that his desire was unchanged, he knew that there was a fresh obstacle between him and its fulfilment. Heaven help him! had there not been enough before? Was it needful that it should become clear to him that nowhere on earth could he find the warmth and the sunlight for which he pined, while a certain pair

of sad eyes grew ever sadder and sadder, looking out on the murky sky, the smoke, the dust, the busy industry of Brenthill? How could he go away? Even these quiet walks of his had pain mixed with their pleasure, when he thought that there was no such liberty for Judith Lisle. Not for her the cowslips in the upland pastures, the hawthorn in the hedges, the elm-boughs high against the breezy sky, the first dog-roses pink upon the briars. Percival turned from them to look at the cloud which hung ever like a dingy smear above Brenthill, and the more he felt their loveliness, the more he felt her loss.

He had no walk on Sunday mornings. A few months earlier Mr. Clifton of St. Sylvester's would have claimed him as a convert. Now he was equally devout, but it was the Evangelical minister, Mr. Bradbury of Christ Church, who saw him week after week, a regular attendant, undaunted and sleepless, though the sermon should be divided into seven heads. Mr. Bradbury preached terribly, in a voice which sometimes died mournfully away, or hissed in a melodramatic whisper, and then rose suddenly in a threatening cry. Miss Macgregor sat in front of a gallery, and looked down on the top of her pastor's head. The double row of little

boys, who were marshalled at her side, grew drowsy in the hot weather, blinked feebly as the discourse progressed, and nodded at the congregation. Now and then Mr. Bradbury, who was only, as it were, at arm's length, turned a little, looked up, and flung a red-hot denunciation into the front seats of the gallery. The little boys woke up, heard what was most likely in store for them on the last day, and sat with eyes wide open, dismally surveying the prospect. But presently the next boy fidgeted, or a spider let himself down from the roof, or a bird flew past the window, or a slanting ray of sunlight revealed a multitude of dusty dancing motes, and the little lads forgot Mr. Bradbury, who had forgotten them, and was busy with somebody else. It might be with the Pope. Mr. Bradbury was fond of providing for the Pope. Or, perhaps, he was wasting his energy on Percival Thorne, who sat with his head thrown back, and his upward glance just missing the preacher, and was quite undisturbed by his appeals.

Judith Lisle had accepted the offer of a situation at Miss Macgregor's with the expectation of being worked to death, only hoping, as she told Mrs. Barton, that the process would be slow. The hope would not

have been at all an unreasonable one, if she had undertaken her task in the days when she had Bertie to work for. She could have lived through much when she lived for Bertie. But, losing her brother, the mainspring of her life seemed broken. One would have said that she had leaned on him, not he on her, she drooped so pitifully now he was gone. Even Miss Macgregor perceived that Miss Lisle was delicate, and expressed her strong disapprobation of such a state of affairs. Mrs. Barton thought Judith looking very far from well, suggested tonics, and began to consider whether she might ask her to go to them for her summer holidays. But to Percival's eyes there was a change from week to week, and he watched her with terror in his heart. Judith had grown curiously younger during the last few months. There had been something of a mother's tenderness in her love for Bertie, which made her appear more than her real age, and gave decision and stateliness to her manner. Now that she was alone, she was only a girl, silent and shrinking, needing all her strength to suffer, and hide her sorrow. Percival knew that each Sunday, as soon as she had taken her place, she would look downward to the pew where he always sat to ascertain if he

were there. For a moment he would meet that quiet gaze, lucid, uncomplaining, but very sad. Then her eyes would be turned to her book, or to the little boys who sat near her, or it might even be to Mr. Bradbury. The long service would begin, go on, come to an end. But before she left her place, her glance would meet his once more, as if in gentle farewell, until another Sunday should come round. Percival would not for worlds have failed at that trysting-place, but he cursed his helplessness. Could he do nothing for Judith but cheer her through Mr. Bradbury's sermons?

About this time he used deliberately to indulge in an impossible fancy. His imagination dwelt on their two lives, cramped, dwarfed and fettered. He had lost his freedom, but it seemed to him that Judith, burdened once with riches, and later with poverty, never had been free. He looked forward, and saw nothing in the future but a struggle for existence, which might be prolonged through years of labour and sordid care. Why were they bound to endure this? Why could they not give up all for just a few days of happiness? Percival longed intensely for a glimpse of beauty, for a little space of warmth and love, of wealth and liberty. Let

their life thus blossom together into joy, and he would be content that it should be like the flowering of the aloe, followed by swift and inevitable death. Only let the death be shared like the life! It would be bitter and terrible to be struck down in their gladness, but if they had truly lived, they might be satisfied to die. Percival used to fancy what they might do in one glorious, golden, sunlit week, brilliant against a black background of death. How free they would be to spend all they possessed, without a thought for the future! Nothing could pall upon them, and he pictured to himself how every sense would be quickened, how passion would gather strength and tenderness, during those brief days, and rise to its noblest height to meet the end. His imagination revelled in the minute details of the picture, adding one by one a thousand touches of beauty and joy, till the dream was life-like in its loveliness. He could pass in a moment from his commonplace world to this enchanted life with Judith. Living alone, and half starving himself in the attempt to pay his debts, he was in a fit state to see visions, and dream dreams. But they only made his present life more distasteful to him, and the more he dreamed of Judith, the more he felt that he had nothing to offer her.

He was summoned abruptly from his fairyland one night by the arrival of Mrs. Bryant. She made her appearance rather suddenly, and sat down on a chair by the door, to have a little chat with her lodger.

'I came back this afternoon,' she said. 'I didn't tell Lydia—where was the use of bothering about writing to her? Besides, I could just have a look round, and see how Emma 'd done the work while I was away, and how things had gone on altogether.' She nodded her rusty black cap confidentially at Percival. It was sprinkled with bugles, which caught the light of his solitary candle.

'I hope you found all right,' he said.

'Pretty well,' Mrs. Bryant allowed. 'It's a mercy when there's no illness, nor anything of that kind—though, if you'll excuse my saying it, Mr. Thorne, you ain't looking as well yourself as I should have liked to see you.'

'Oh, I am all right, thank you,' said Percival.

Mrs. Bryant shook her head. The different movement brought out quite a different effect of glancing bugles. 'Young people should be careful of their health,' was her profound remark.

'I assure you there's nothing the matter with me.'

'Well, well—we'll hope not,' she answered 'though you certainly do look altered, Mr. Thorne, through being thinner in the face, and darker under the eyes.'

Percival smiled impatiently.

'What was I saying?' Mrs. Bryant continued. 'Oh, yes—that there was a many mercies to be thankful for. To find the house all right, and the times and times I've dreamed of fire, and the engines not to be had, and woke up shaking so as you'd hardly believe it—and I don't really think that I've gone to bed hardly one night without wondering whether Lydia had fastened the door, and the little window into the yard, which is not safe if left open. As regular as clockwork, when the time came round, I'd mention it to my sister——'

Percival sighed briefly, probably pitying the sister. 'I think Miss Bryant has been very careful in fastening everything,' he said.

'Well, it does seem so, and very thankful I am. And as I always say when I go out, "Waste I *must* expect, and waste I *do* expect," but it's a mercy when there's no thieving.'

'Things will hardly go on quite the same when you are not here to look after them, Mrs. Bryant.'

'No—how should they?' the landlady acquiesced. 'Young heads ain't like old ones, as I said one evening to my sister, when Smith was by. Young heads ain't like old ones, said I. "Why no," said Smith, "they're a deal prettier." I told him he ought to have done thinking of such things, and so he ought—a man of his age. But that's what the young men mostly think of, ain't it, Mr. Thorne? Though it's the old heads make the best housekeepers, I think, when there's a lot of lodgers to look after.'

'Very likely,' said Percival.

'I daresay you think there'd be fine times for the young men lodgers, if it wasn't for the old heads. And I don't blame you, Mr. Thorne—it's only natural, and what we must expect in growing old. And if anything could make one grow old before one's time, and live two years in one, so to speak, I do think it's letting lodgings.'

Percival expressed himself as not surprised to hear it, though very sorry that lodgers were so injurious to her health.

'There's my drawing-room empty now, and two bedrooms,' Mrs. Bryant continued. 'Not but what I've had an offer for it this very afternoon, since coming back. But it doesn't do to be too hasty. Respectable

parties who pay regular,' she nodded a little at Percival, as if to point the compliment, 'are the parties for me.'

'Of course,' he said.

'A queer business that of young Mr. Lisle's, wasn't it?' she went on. 'I should say it was about time that Miss Crawford did shut up, if she couldn't manage her young ladies better. I sent my Lydia to a boarding-school once, but it was one of a different kind to that. Pretty goings on there were at Standon Square, I'll be bound, if we only knew the truth. But as far as this goes, there ain't no great harm done that I can see. He hasn't done badly for himself, and I dare say they'll be very comfortable. She might have picked a worse—I will say that—for he was always a pleasant-spoken young gentleman, and good-looking too, though that's not a thing to set much store by. And they do say he had seen better times.'

She paused. Percival murmured something which was quite unintelligible, but it served to start her off again, apparently under the impression that she had heard a remark of some kind.

'Yes, I suppose so. And as I was saying to Lydia—the coolness of them both—banns and all regular! But there now!

I'm talking and talking, forgetting that you were in the thick of it. You knew all about it, I've no doubt, and finely you and he must have laughed in your sleeves——'

'I knew nothing about it, Mrs. Bryant. Nothing.'

Mrs. Bryant smiled cunningly, and nodded at him again. But it was an oblique nod this time, and there was a sidelong look to match it. Percival felt as if he were suffering from an aggravated form of nightmare.

'No, no—I dare say you didn't. At any rate, you won't let out if you did—why should you? It's a great thing to be able to hold one's tongue, Mr. Thorne, and I ought to know, for I've found the advantage of being naturally a silent woman. And I don't say but what you are wise.'

'I knew nothing,' he repeated doggedly.

'Well, I don't suppose it was any the worse for anybody who *did* know,' said Mrs. Bryant. 'And though, of course, Miss Lisle lost her situation through it, I dare say she finds it quite made up to her.'

'Not at all,' said Percival, shortly. The conversation was becoming intolerable.

'Oh, you may depend upon it she does,' said Mrs. Bryant. 'How should a gentleman like you know all the ins and outs, Mr. Thorne?

It makes all the difference to a young woman, having a brother well to do in the world. And very fond of her he always seemed to be, as I was remarking to Lydia.'

Percival felt as if all his blood were on fire. He dare not profess too intimate a knowledge of Judith's feelings and position, and he could not listen in silence. 'I think you are mistaken, Mrs. Bryant,' he said in a tone which would have betrayed his angry disgust to any more sensitive ear. Even his landlady perceived that the subject was not a welcome one.

'Well, well,' she said. 'It doesn't matter, and I'll only wish you as good luck as Mr. Lisle; for I'm sure you deserve a young lady with a little bit of money as well as he did, and no reason why you shouldn't look to find one, one of these fine days.'

'No, Mrs. Bryant, I shan't copy Mr. Lisle.'

'Ah, you've something else in your eye, I can see, and perhaps one might make a guess as to a name. Well, people must manage those things their own way, and interfering mostly does harm, I take it. And I'll wish you luck, anyhow.'

'I don't think there's any occasion for your good wishes,' said Percival. 'Thank you all the same.'

'Not but what I'm sorry to lose Mr. and Miss Lisle,' Mrs. Bryant continued, as if that were the natural end of her previous sentence, 'for they paid for everything most regular.'

'I hope these people who want to come may do the same,' said Percival. Though he knew that he ran the risk of hearing all that Mrs. Bryant could tell him about their condition and prospects, he felt he could endure anything that would turn the conversation from the Lisles and himself. But there was a different train of ideas in Mrs. Bryant's mind.

'And, by the way,' she said, 'I think we've some little accounts to settle together, Mr. Thorne.' Then Percival perceived for the first time, that she held a folded bit of paper in her hand. The moment that he feared had come. He rose without a word, went to his desk and unlocked it. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that Mrs. Bryant had approached the table, had opened the paper, and was flattening it out with her hand. He stooped over his hoard—a meagre little hoard this time—counting what he had to give her.

Mrs. Bryant began to hunt in her purse for a receipt stamp. 'It's a pleasure to have to do with a gentleman who is always so regular,' she said with an approving smile.

Percival, who was steadying a little pile of coin on the sloping desk, felt a strong desire to tell her the state of affairs while he stooped in the shadow, with his face turned away. Precisely because he felt this desire, he drew himself up to his full height, walked to the table, looked straight into her eyes, and said, 'Not so very regular this time, Mrs. Bryant.'

She stepped back, with a perplexed and questioning expression, but she understood that something was wrong, and the worn face fell suddenly, deepening a multitude of melancholy wrinkles. He laid the money before her. 'That's just half what I owe you; I think you'll find I have counted it all right.'

'Half! But where's the other half, Mr. Thorne?'

'Well, I must earn the other half, Mrs. Bryant. You shall have it as soon as I get it.'

She looked up at him. 'You've got to earn it!' she repeated. Her tone would have been more appropriate if Mr. Thorne had said he must steal it. There was a pause. Mrs. Bryant's lean hand closed over the money. 'I don't understand this, Mr. Thorne, I don't understand it at all.'

'It is very simple,' he replied. 'According to your wishes, I kept the rent for you, but

during your absence there was a sudden call upon me for money, and I could not refuse to advance it. I regret it exceedingly, if it puts you to any inconvenience. I had hoped to have made it all right before you returned, but I have not had time. I can only promise you that you shall be paid all that I can put by each week, till I have cleared off my debt.'

'Oh, that's all very fine,' said Mrs. Bryant. 'But I don't think much of promises.'

'I am sorry to hear it,' he answered gravely.

She looked hard at him. 'I did think you were quite the gentleman, Mr. Thorne. I didn't think you'd have served me so.'

'No,' said Percival. 'I assure you I'm very sorry. If I could explain the whole affair to you, you would see that I am not to blame. But unluckily I can't.'

'Oh, I don't want any explanations; I wouldn't give a thank you for a cart load of 'em. Nobody ever is to blame who has the explaining of a thing, if it's ever so rascally a job.'

'I am very sorry,' he repeated. 'But I can only say that you shall be paid.'

'Oh, I dare say! Look here, Mr. Thorne, I've heard that sort of thing scores of times. There's always a sudden call for money—

it's always something that never happened before, and isn't ever to happen again—and it's always going to be paid back at once, but there's not one in a hundred who does pay it. Once you begin that sort of thing'——

'You'll find me that hundredth one,' said Percival.

'Oh yes. To hear them talk you'd say each one was one in a thousand, at least. But I'd like you to know that though I'm a widow woman I'm not to be robbed and put upon.'

'Mrs. Bryant,' Percival's strong voice silenced her querulous tones, 'no one wants to rob you. Please to remember that it was entirely of your own free will that you trusted me with the money.'

'More fool I!' Mrs. Bryant ejaculated.

'It was to oblige you that I took charge of it.'

'And a pretty mess I've made of it. It had better have gone so as to be some pleasure to my own flesh and blood—instead of your spending it in some way you're ashamed to own.'

'If you had been here to receive it, it would have been ready for you,' Percival went on, ignoring her last speech. 'As it is, it has waited all these weeks for you. It

isn't unreasonable that it should wait a little longer for me.'

She muttered something to the effect that there was justice to be had, though he didn't seem to think it.

'Oh yes,' he said, resting his arm on the chimney-piece. 'There's the County Court, or something of that kind. By all means go to the County Court, if you like. But I see no occasion for discussing the matter any more beforehand.'

His calmness had its effect upon her. She didn't want any unpleasantness, she said.

'Neither do I,' he replied, 'I do not see why there need be any. If I live you will be paid, and that before very long. If I should happen to die first, I have a friend who will settle my affairs for me, and you will be no loser.'

Mrs. Bryant suggested that it might be pleasanter for all parties if Mr. Thorne were to apply to his friend at once. She thought very likely there were little bills about in the town—gentlemen very often had little bills—and if there were any difficulties—gentlemen so often got into difficulties—it was so much better to have things settled and make a fresh start. She had no doubt that Mr. Lisle would be very willing.

'Mr. Lisle!' Percival exclaimed. 'Do

you suppose for one moment I should ask Mr. Lisle?'

Startled at his vehemence Mrs. Bryant begged pardon, and substituted 'the gentleman' for 'Mr. Lisle.'

'Thank you—no,' said Percival. I prefer to manage my own affairs in my own way. If I live, I will not apply to any one. But if I must go to my grave owing five or six weeks' rent to one or other of you, I assure you most solemnly, Mrs. Bryant, that I will owe it to my friend.'

The storm had subsided into subdued grumblings. Their purport was apparently that Mrs. Bryant liked lodgers who paid regular, and as for those who didn't, they would have to leave, and she wished them to know it.

'Does that mean that you wish me to go?' the young man demanded with the readiness which was too much for his landlady. 'I'll go to-night if you like. Do you wish it?' There was an air of such promptitude about him as he spoke, that Mrs. Byrant half expected to see him vanish then and there. She had by no means made up her mind that she did wish to lose a lodger who had been so entirely satisfactory up to that time. And she preferred to keep her debtor within reach,

so she drew back a little, and qualified what she had said.

'Very well,' said Percival. 'Just as you please.'

Mrs. Bryant only hoped it wouldn't occur again. The tempest of her wrath showed fearful symptoms of dissolving in a shower of tears. 'You don't know what work I have to make both ends meet, Mr. Thorne,' she said, 'nor how hard it is to get one's own, let alone keeping it. I do assure you, Mr. Thorne, me and Lydia might go in silks every day of our lives, and needn't so much as soil our fingers with the work of the house, if we had all we rightly should have. But there are folks who call themselves honest, who don't think any harm of taking a widow woman's rooms, and getting behindhand with the rent, running up an account for milk and vegetables and the like by the week together, and there's the bell ringing all day as you may say, with the bills coming in, and one's almost driven out of one's wits with the worry of it all, let alone the loss, which is hard to bear, Oh, I do hope, Mr. Thorne, that it won't occur again!'

'It isn't very likely,' said Percival, privately thinking that suicide would be preferable to an existence in which such interviews

with his landlady should be of frequent occurrence. Pity, irritation, disgust, pride and humiliation made up a state of feeling which was overshadowed by a horrible fear that Mrs. Bryant would begin to weep before he could get rid of her. He watched her with ever-increasing uneasiness, while she attempted to give him a receipt for the money he had paid. She began by wiping her spectacles, but her hand trembled so much that she let them fall, and she, Percival, and the candle were all on the floor together, assisting one another in the search for them. The rusty cap was perilously near the flame more than once, which was a cause of fresh anxiety on his part. And when she was once more established at the table, writing a word or two, and then wiping her eyes, it was distracting to discover that the receipt stamp, which Mrs. Bryant had brought with her, and which she was certain she had laid on the table, had mysteriously disappeared. It seemed to Percival that he spent at least a quarter of an hour hunting for that stamp. In reality about two minutes elapsed before it was found sticking to Mrs. Bryant's damp pocket-handkerchief. It was removed thence with great care, clinging to her fingers by the way, after which it showed a not unnatural disinclination

to adhere to the paper. But even that difficulty was at last overcome; a shaky signature and a date were laboriously penned, and Percival's heart beat high, as he received the completed document.

And then—Mrs. Bryant laid down the pen, took off her spectacles, shook her pocket-handkerchief, and deliberately burst into tears.

Percival was in despair. Of course he knew perfectly well that he was not a heartless brute, but equally of course he felt that he must be a heartless brute, as he stood by while Mrs. Bryant wept copiously. Of course he begged her to calm herself, and of course a long drawn sob was her only answer. All at once there was a knock at the door. 'Come in,' said Percival, feeling that matters could not possibly be worse. It opened, and Lydia stood on the threshold, staring at the pair in much surprise.

'Well I never!' she said, and turning towards Percival, she eyed him suspiciously, as if she thought he might have been knocking the old lady about. 'And pray what may be the meaning of this?'

'Mrs. Bryant isn't quite herself this evening, I am afraid,' said Percival, feeling that his reply was very feeble. 'And we

have had a little business to settle which was not quite satisfactory.'

At the word 'business' Lydia stepped forward, and her surprise gave place to an expression of half incredulous amusement, Percival would almost have said, of delight.

'What—ain't the money all right?' she said. 'You don't say so! Well, ma, you *have* been clever this time, haven't you? Oh I suppose you thought I didn't know what you were after, when you were so careful about not bothering me with the accounts? Lor! I knew fast enough. Don't you feel proud of yourself for having managed it so well?'

Mrs. Bryant wept. Percival, not having a word to say, preserved a dignified silence.

'Come along, ma—I dare say Mr. Thorne has had about enough of this,' Lydia went on, coolly examining the paper which lay on the table. She arrived at the total. 'Oh that's it, is it? Well I like that—I do! Some people are so clever, ain't they? So wonderfully sharp they can't trust their own belongings! I do like that! Come along, ma!' And Lydia seconded her summons with such energetic action that it seemed to Percival that she absolutely swept the old lady out of the room, and that the wet handkerchief, the rusty black gown, and the

bugle-sprinkled head-dress vanished in a whirlwind, with a sound of shrill laughter on the stairs.

For a moment his heart leapt with a sudden sense of relief and freedom, but only for a moment. Then he flung himself into his arm-chair utterly dejected and sickened.

Should he be subject to this kind of thing all his life long? If he should chance to be ill, and unable to work, how could he live for any length of time on his paltry savings? And debt would mean *this!* He need not even be ill. He remembered how he broke his arm once, when he was a lad. Suppose he broke his arm now—a bit of orange peel in the street might do it—or suppose he hurt the hand with which he wrote.

And this was the life which he might ask Judith to share with him. She might endure Mrs. Bryant's scolding and Lydia's laughter, and pinch and save as he was forced to do, and grow weary, and careworn, and sick at heart. No, God forbid! And yet—and yet—was she not enduring as bad or worse in that hateful school?

Oh for his dream! one week of life and love, and then swift exit from a hideous world, where Mrs. Bryant, and Miss Macgregor, and Lydia, and all his other night-

mares might do their worst, and fight their hardest, in their ugly struggle for existence!

Percival had achieved something of a victory in his encounter with his landlady. His manner had been calm and fairly easy, and from first to last she had been more conscious of his calmness than Percival was himself. She had been silenced, not coaxed and flattered as she often was by unfortunate lodgers whose ready money ran short. Indeed she had been defied, and when she recovered herself a little she declared that she had never seen anyone so stuck up as Mr. Thorne. This was unkind, after he had gone down on his knees to look for her spectacles.

But if Percival had conquered, his was but a barren victory. He fancied that an unwonted tone of deference crept into his voice when he gave his orders. He was afraid of Mrs. Bryant. He faced Lydia bravely, but he winced in secret at the recollection of her laughter. He very nearly starved himself lest mother or daughter should be able to say 'Mr. Thorne might have remembered his debts before he ordered this, or that.' He had paid Lisle's bill at Mr. Robinson's, but he could not forget his own, and he walked past the house daily

with his head high, feeling himself a miserable coward.

There was a draper's shop close to it, and as he went by one day he saw a little pony chaise at the door. A girl of twelve or thirteen sat in it, listlessly holding the reins, and looking up and down the street. It was a great field-day for the Brenthill volunteers, and their band came round the corner, not a dozen yards away, and suddenly struck up a triumphant march. The pony, although as quiet a little creature as you could easily find, was startled. If it had been a wooden rocking-horse it might not have minded, but any greater sensibility must have received a shock. The girl uttered a cry of alarm, but there was no cause for it. Percival, who was close at hand, stepped to the pony's head, a lady rushed out of the shop, the band went by in a tempest of martial music, a crowd of boys and girls filled the roadway, and disappeared as quickly as they came. It was all over in a minute. Percival, who was coaxing the pony as he stood, was warmly thanked.

'There is nothing to thank me for,' he said. 'That band was enough to frighten anything, but the pony seems a gentle little thing.'

'So it is,' the lady replied. 'But you see

the driver was very inexperienced, and we really are very much obliged to you, Mr. Thorne.'

He looked at her in blank amazement. Had some one from his former life suddenly arisen to claim acquaintance with him? He glanced from her to the girl, but recognised neither. 'You know me?' he said.

She smiled. 'You don't know me, I daresay. I am Mrs. Barton. I saw you one day when I was just coming away, after calling on Miss Lisle.' She watched the hero of her romance as she spoke. His dark face lighted up suddenly.

'I have often heard Miss Lisle speak of you, and of your kindness,' he said. 'Do you ever see her now?'

'Oh yes. She comes to give Janie her music lesson every Wednesday afternoon. We couldn't do without Miss Lisle, could we, Janie?' The girl was shy and did not speak, but a broad smile overspread her face.

'I had no idea she still came to you. Do you know how she gets on at Miss Macgregor's?' he asked, eagerly. 'Is she well? I saw her at church one day, and I thought she was pale.'

'She says she is well,' Mrs. Barton

replied. 'But I am not very fond of Miss Macgregor myself—no one ever stays there very long.' A shopman came out and put a parcel into the chaise. Mrs. Barton took the reins. 'I shall tell Miss Lisle you asked after her,' she said, as with a bow and cordial smile she drove off.

It was Monday, and Percival's mind was speedily made up. He would see Judith Lisle on Wednesday.

Tuesday was a remarkably long day, but Wednesday came at last, and he obtained permission to leave the office earlier than usual. He knew the street in which Mrs. Barton lived, and had taken some trouble to ascertain the number, so that he could stroll to and fro at a safe distance, commanding a view of the door.

He had time to study the contents of a milliner's window—it was the only shop near at hand, and even that pretended not to be a shop, but rather a private house, where some one had accidentally left a bonnet or two, a few sprays of artificial flowers, and an old lady's cap, in the front room. He had abundant leisure to watch No. 51 taking in a supply of coals, and No. 63 sending away a piano. He sauntered to and fro so long, with a careless assumption of unconsciousness

how time was passing, that a stupid young policeman perceived that he was not an ordinary passer-by. Astonished and delighted at his own penetration, he began to saunter and watch him, trying to make out which house he meant to favour with a midnight visit. Percival saw quite a procession of babies in perambulators being wheeled home by their nurses after their afternoon airing, and he discovered that the nurse at No. 57 had a flirtation with a soldier. But at last the door of No. 69 opened, a slim figure came down the steps, and he started to meet it, leisurely, but with a sudden decision and purpose in his walk. The young policeman saw the meeting; the whole affair became clear to him—why, he had done that sort of thing himself!—and he hurried off rather indignantly, feeling that he had wasted his time, and that the supposed burglar had not behaved at all handsomely.

And Percival went forward and held out his hand to Judith, but found that even the most commonplace greeting stuck in his throat somehow. She looked quickly up at him, but she too was silent, and he walked a few steps by her side before he said, 'I did not know what day you were going away.'

The rest of the conversation followed in

a swift interchange of question and reply, as if to make up for that pause.

'No, but I thought I should be sure to have a chance of saying goodbye.'

'And I was out. I was very sorry when I came home and found that you were gone. But since we have met again it doesn't matter now, does it?' he said, with a smile, 'How do you get on at Miss Macgregor's?'

'Oh, very well,' she answered. 'It will do for the present.'

'And Miss Crawford—?'

'She will not see me nor hear from me. She is ill and low-spirited, and Mrs. Barton tells me that a niece has come to look after her.'

'Isn't that rather a good thing?'

'No—I don't like it. I saw one or two of those nieces—there are seven of them—great vulgar managing women. I can't bear to think of my dear little Miss Crawford being bullied and nursed by Miss Price. She couldn't endure them, I know, only she was so fond of their mother.'

Percival changed the subject. 'So you go to Mrs. Barton's still? I didn't know that till last Monday.'

'When you rescued Janie from imminent peril—Oh, I have heard,' said Judith, with a smile.

'Please to describe me as risking my own life in the act. It would be a pity not to make me heroic while you are about it.'

'Janie would readily believe it. She measures her danger by her terror, which was great. But she is a dear, good child, and it is such a pleasure to me to go there every week.'

'Ah! Then you are not happy at Miss Macgregor's?'

'Well—not very. But it might be much worse. And I am mercenary enough to think about the money I earn at Mrs. Barton's,' said Judith. 'I don't mind telling you now that Bertie left two or three little bills unpaid when he went away, and I was very anxious about them. But luckily they were small.'

'You don't mind telling me now—are they paid, then?'

'Yes, and I have not heard of any more.'

'You paid them out of your earnings?'

'Yes. You understand me, don't you, Mr. Thorne? Bertie and I were together then, and I could not take Emmeline's money to pay our debts.'

'Yes. I understand.'

'And I had saved a little. It is all right now, since they are all paid. I fancied there

would be some more to come in, but it seems not, so I have a pound or two to spare, and I feel quite rich.'

It struck Percival that Judith had managed better than he had. 'Do you ever hear from him?' he asked.

'Yes. Mr. Nash has forgiven them."

'Already?'

Judith nodded. 'He has, though I thought he never would. Bertie understood him better.'

(The truth was that she had taken impotent rage for strength of purpose. Mr. Nash was aware that he had neglected his daughter, and was anxious to stifle the thought by laying the blame on every one else. And Bertie was quicker than Judith was in reading character when it was on his own level.)

'He has forgiven them,' Percival repeated, with a smile. 'Well, Bertie is a lucky fellow.'

'So is my father lucky—if that is luck.'

'Your father?'

'Yes. He has written to me, and to my Aunt Lisle, at Rookleigh, you know. He has taken another name, and it seems he is getting on and making money—*he* wanted to send me some too. And my aunt is angry with me because I would not go to her. She

has given me two months to made up my mind in.'

'And you will not go?'

'I cannot leave Brenthill,' said Judith. 'She is more than half inclined to forgive Bertie too. So I am alone—and yet I am right.' She uttered the last words with lingering sadness.

'No doubt,' Percival answered. They were walking slowly through a quiet back street, with a blank wall on one side. 'Still it is hard,' he said.

There was something so simple and tender in his tone, that Judith looked up and met his eyes She might have read his words in them, even if he had not spoken. 'Don't pity me, Mr. Thorne,' she said.

'Why not?'

Oh, because—I hardly know why. I can't stand it when anyone is kind to me, or sorry for me, sometimes at Mrs. Barton's. I don't know how to bear it. But it does not matter much, for I get braver and braver when people are hard and cold—I really don't mind that half as much as you would think, so you see you needn't pity me. In fact, you mustn't.'

'Indeed, I think I must,' said Percival. 'More than before.'

'No, no!' she answered, hurriedly. 'Don't

say it. Don't look it. Don't even let me think you do it in your heart. Tell me about yourself. You listen to me, you ask about me, but you say nothing of what you are doing.'

'Working.' There was a moment's hesitation. 'And dreaming,' he added.

'But you have been ill?'

'Not I.'

'You have not been ill? Then you are ill. What makes you so pale?'

He laughed. 'Am I pale?'

'And you look tired.'

'My work is wearisome sometimes.'

'More so than it was?' she questioned, anxiously. 'You used not to look so tired.'

'Don't you think that a wearisome thing must grow more wearisome merely by going on?'

'But is that all? Isn't there anything else the matter?'

'Perhaps there is,' he allowed. 'There are little worries of course, but shall I tell you what is the great thing that is the matter with me?'

'If you will.'

'I miss you, Judith.'

The colour spread over her face like a rosy dawn. Her eyes were fixed on the pavement, and yet they looked as if they

caught a glimpse of Eden. But Percival could not see that. 'You miss me!' she said.

'Yes.' He had forgotten his hesitation and despair. He had outstripped them, had left them far behind, and his words sprang to his lips with a glad sense of victory and freedom. 'Must I miss you always?' he said. 'Will you not come back to me, Judith? My work could never be wearisome then, when I should feel that I was working for you. There would be long to wait, no doubt, and then a hard life—a poor home—what have I to offer you? But will you come?'

She looked up at him. 'Do you really want me—or is it that you are sorry for me, and want to help me? Are you sure it isn't that? We Lisles have done you harm enough. I won't do you a worse wrong still.'

'You will do me the worst wrong of all if you let such fears and fancies stand between you and me,' said Percival. 'Do you not know that I love you? You must decide as your own heart tells you. But don't doubt me.'

She laid her hand lightly on his arm. 'Forgive me, Percival!' And so those two passed together into the Eden which she had seen.

CHAPTER X.

HOW THE SUN ROSE IN GLADNESS, AND SET IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

THE Wednesday which was so white a day for Judith and Percival, had dawned brightly at Fordborough. Sissy, opening her eyes on the radiant beauty of the morning, sprang up with an exclamation of delight. The day before had been grey and uncertain, but this was golden and cloudless. A light breeze tossed the acacia boughs, and showed flashes of blue between the quivering sprays. The dew was still hanging on the clustered white roses which climbed to her open window, and the birds were singing among the leaves, as if they were running races in a headlong rapture of delight. Sissy did not sing, but she said to herself, 'Oh, how glad the Latimers must be!'

She was right, for at a still earlier hour the Latimer girls had been flying in and out

of their respective rooms, in a perfectly aimless, joyous, childishly happy fashion, like a flock of white pigeons. And the sum of their conversation was simply this, 'Oh, what a day! What a glorious day!' Yet it sufficed for a Babel of bird-like voices. At last one, more energetic than the rest, in her white dressing-gown, and with her hair hanging loose, flew down the long oak-panelled corridor, and knocked with might and main at her brother's door. 'Walter! Walter! Wake up, do! You said it would rain, and it doesn't rain! It is a *lovely* morning! O Walter!'

Walter responded briefly, to the effect that he had been awake since half after three, and was aware of the fact.

Henry Hardwicke, who had been to the river for an early swim, stopped to discuss the weather with a labourer who was plodding across the fields. The old man looked at the blue sky with an air of unutterable wisdom, made some profound remarks about the quarter in which the wind was, added a local saying or two bearing on the case, and summed up to the effect that it was a fine day.

Captain Fothergill had no particular view from his window, but he inquired at an early hour what the weather was like.

Ashendale Priory was a fine old ruin, belonging to the Latimers, and about six miles from Latimer's Court. Sissy Langton had said one day that she often passed it in her rides, but had never been into it. Walter Latimer was astonished, horrified, and delighted all at once, and vowed that she must see it, and should see it, without delay. This Wednesday had been fixed for an excursion there, but the project was nearly given up on account of the weather. As late as the previous afternoon the question was seriously debated at the Court, by a council composed of Walter and three of his sisters. One of the members was sent to look at the barometer. She reported that it had gone up in the most extraordinary manner since luncheon.

The announcement was greeted with delight, but it was discovered late that evening, that Miss Latimer had had a happy thought. Fearing that the barometer would be utterly ruined by the shaking and tapping which it underwent, she had screwed it up to a height at which her younger brothers and sisters could not wish to disturb it, had gone into the village, and had forgotten all about it. There was general dismay and laughter.

'It will rain,' said Walter; 'it will certainly rain. I thought it was very queer.

Well, it is too late to do anything now. We must just wait and see what happens.'

And behold the morrow had come, the clouds were gone, and it was a day in a thousand, a very queen of days.

The party started for Ashendale, some riding, some driving, waking the green lanes with a happy tumult of wheels, and horse-hoofs, and laughing voices. Captain Fothergill contrived to be near Miss Langton, and to talk in a fashion which made her look down once or twice, when she had encountered the eagerness of his dark eyes. The words he said might have been published by the town-crier. But that functionary would not have reproduced the tone and manner which rendered them significant, though Sissy hardly knew the precise amount of meaning they were intended to convey. She was glad when the tower of the Priory rose above the trees. So was Walter Latimer, who had been eyeing the back of Fothergill's head, or the sharply-cut profile which was turned so frequently towards Miss Langton, and who was firmly persuaded that the Captain ought to be shot.

Ashendale Priory was built nearly at the bottom of a hill. Part of it, close by the gateway, was a farm-house, occupied by a

tenant of the Latimers. His wife, a pleasant middle-aged woman, came out to meet them as they dismounted, and a rosy daughter of sixteen or seventeen lingered shyly in the little garden, which was full to overflowing of old-fashioned flowers, and humming with multitudes of bees. The hot sweet fragrance of the crowded borders made Sissy say that it was like the very heart of summer-time.

'A place to recollect and dream of on a November day,' said Fothergill.

'Oh, don't talk of November now. I hate it.'

'I don't want November, I assure you,' he replied. 'Why cannot this last for ever?'

'The weather?'

'Much more than the weather. Do you suppose I should only remember that it was a fine day?'

'What, the place too?' said Sissy. 'It is beautiful, but I think you would soon get tired of Ashendale, Captain Fothergill.'

'Do you?' he said in a low voice, looking at her with the eyes which seemed to draw hers to meet them. 'Try me, and see which will be tired first.' And, without giving her time to answer, he went on, 'Couldn't you be content with Ashendale?'

'For always? I don't think I could. Not for all my life.'

'Well then the perfect place is yet to find,' said Fothergill. 'And how charming it must be!'

'If one should ever find it!' said Sissy.

'One!' Fothergill looked at her again. 'Not *one!* Won't you hope we may both find it?'

'Like the people who hunted for the Earthly Paradise,' said Sissy hurriedly, 'Look, they are going to the ruins.' And she hastened to join the others.

Latimer noticed that she evidently, and very properly, would not permit Fothergill to monopolise her, but seemed rather to avoid the fellow. To his surprise, however, he found that there was no better fortune for himself. Fothergill had brought a sailor cousin, a boy of nineteen, curly-haired, sunburnt, and merry, with a sailor's delight in flirtation and fun; and Archibald Carroll fixed his violent, though temporary, affections on Sissy, the moment he was introduced to her at the Priory. To Latimer's great disgust Sissy distinctly encouraged him, and the two went off together during the progress round the ruins. There were some old fish-ponds to be seen, with swans, and reeds, and water-lilies,

and when they were tired of scrambling about the grey walls, there was a little copse hard by, the perfection of sylvan scenery on a small scale. The party speedily dispersed, rambling where their fancy led them, and were seen no more till the hour which had been fixed for dinner. Mrs. Latimer, meanwhile, chose a space of level turf, superintended the unpacking of hampers, and when the wanderers came dropping in, by twos and threes, from all points of the compass, professing unbounded readiness to help in the preparations, there was nothing left for them to do. Among the latest were Sissy and her squire, a radiant pair. She was charmed with her saucy sailor boy, who had no serious intentions or hopes, who would most likely be gone on the morrow, and who asked nothing more than to be happy with her, through that happy summer day. People and things were apt to grow perplexing and sad, when they came into her everyday life, but here was a holiday companion, arrived as unexpected as if he were created for her holiday, with no such thing as an afterthought about the whole affair.

Latimer sulked, but his rival smiled when the two young people arrived. For—thus argued Raymond Fothergill, with a vanity

which was so calm, so clear, so certain, that it sounded like reason itself—it was not possible that Sissy Langton preferred Carroll to himself. Even had it been Latimer, or Hardwicke—but Carroll—no! Therefore she used the one cousin merely to avoid the other. But why did she wish to avoid him? He remembered her blushes, her shyness, the eyes that sank before his own, and he answered promptly that she feared him. He triumphed in the thought. He had contended against a gentle indifference on Sissy's part, till, having heard rumours of a bygone love affair, he had suspected the existence of an unacknowledged constancy. Then what did this fear mean? It was obviously the self-distrust of a heart unwilling to yield; clinging to its old loyalty, yet aware of a new weakness, seeking safety in flight, because unable to resist. Fothergill was conscious of power, and could wait with patience. (It would have been unreasonable to expect him to spend an equal amount of time and talent, in accounting for Miss Langton's equally evident avoidance of young Latimer. Besides, that was a simple matter. He bored her, no doubt.)

When the business of eating and drinking was drawing to a close, little Edith Latimer, the youngest of the party, began to arrange

a lapful of wild flowers, which she had brought back from her ramble. Hardwicke, who had helped her to collect them, handed them to her, one by one. A green tuft which he held up caught Sissy's eye.

'Why, Edie, what have you got there?' she said. 'Is that maidenhair spleenwort? Where did you find it?'

'In a crack in the wall—there's a lot more,' the child answered, and at the same moment Hardwicke said, 'Shall I get you some?'

'No—I'll get some,' exclaimed Archie, who was lying at Sissy's feet. 'Miss Langton would rather I got it for her, I know.'

Sissy arched her brows.

'She has so much more confidence in me,' Archie explained. 'Please give me a leaf of that stuff, Miss Latimer, I want to see what it's like.'

'My confidence is rather misplaced, I'm afraid, if you don't know what you are going to look for.'

'Not a bit misplaced. You know very well I shall have a sort of instinct which will take me straight to it.'

'Dear me! It hasn't any smell, you know,' said Sissy with perfect gravity.

'Oh how cruel!' said Carroll. 'Withering up my delicate feelings with thoughtless

sarcasm! Smell—no! My what d'ye call it—sympathy—will tell me what it is. My heart will beat faster as I approach it. But I'll have that leaf all the same, please.'

'And it might be as well to know where to look for it.'

'We found it in the ruins—in the wall of the refectory,' said Hardwicke.

Sissy looked doubtful, but Carroll exclaimed, 'Oh I know! That's where the old fellows used to dine, isn't? And had sermons read to them all the time!'

'What a bore!' some one suggested.

'Well, I don't know about that,' said Archie. 'Sermons always are awful bores, ain't they? But I don't think I should mind 'em so much if I might eat my dinner all the time.' He stopped with a comical look of alarm. 'I say—we havn't got any parsons here, have we?'

'No,' said Fothergill smiling. 'We've brought the surgeon, in case of broken bones, but we've left the chaplain at home. So you may give us the full benefit of your opinions.'

'I thought there wasn't one,' Archie remarked, looking up at Sissy, 'because nobody said grace. Or don't you ever say grace at a pic-nic?'

'I don't think you do,' Sissy replied.

'Unless it were a very Low Church pic-nic, perhaps. I don't know, I'm sure.'

'Makes a difference being out of doors, I suppose,' said Archie, examining the little frond which Edith had given him. 'And this is what you call maiden-hair?'

'What should you call it?'

'A libel!' he answered promptly. 'Maiden-hair indeed! Why I can see some a thousand times prettier, quite close by. What can you want with this? *You* can't see the other, but I'll tell you what it's like. It's the most beautiful brown, with gold in it, and it grows in little ripples, and waves, and curls, and nothing ever was half so fine before, and it catches just the edge of a ray of sunshine—Oh, don't move your head!—and looks like a golden glory—'

'Dear me!' said Sissy. 'Then I'm afraid it's very rough!'

—'And the least bit of it is worth a cartload of this green rubbish!'

'Ah! But you see it is very much harder to get.'

'Of course it is,' said Archie. 'But exchange is no robbery, they say. Suppose I go and dig up some of this, don't you think —remembering that I'm a poor sailor boy, going to be banished from "England, home,

and beauty," and that I shall most likely be drowned on my next voyage—don't you think—'

'I think that, on your own showing, you must get me at least a cartload of the other, before you have the face to finish that sentence.'

'A cartload! I feel like a prince in a fairy tale. And what would you do with it all?'

'Well, I really hardly know what I should do with it.'

'There now!' said Archie. 'And I could tell you in a moment what I would do with mine, if you gave it me!'

'Oh, but I could tell you that!'

'Tell me, then.'

'You would fold it up carefully in a neat little bit of paper, but you would not write anything on it, because you would not like it to look business-like. Besides, you couldn't possibly forget. And a few months hence you will have lost your heart to some foreign young lady—I don't know where you are going—and you would find the little packet in your desk, and wonder who gave it to you.'

'Oh, how little you know me!' Archie exclaimed, and sank back on the turf in a despairing attitude. But a moment later he began to laugh, and sat up again.

'There *was* a bit once,' he said confidentially, 'and for the life of me I couldn't think whose it could be. There were two or three girls I knew it couldn't possibly belong to, but that didn't help me very far. That lock of hair quite haunted me—see what it is to have such susceptible feelings! I used to look at it a dozen times a day, and I couldn't sleep at night for thinking of it. At last I said to myself, "I don't care whose it is—she was a nice, dear girl anyhow, and I'm sure she wouldn't like to think that she bothered me in this way." So I consigned it to a watery grave. I felt very melancholy when it went, I can tell you, and if my own hair had been a reasonable length, I'd have sent a bit of it overboard with hers, just for company's sake. But I'd had a fever, and I was cropped like a convict, so I couldn't.'

'You tell that little story very nicely,' said Sissy when he paused. 'Do you always mention it when you ask—'

'Why, no!' Archie exclaimed. 'I thought *you* would take it as it was meant, as the greatest possible compliment to yourself. But I suppose it's my destiny to be misunderstood. Don't you see that I *couldn't* tell that to anyone, unless I were quite sure that she was so much higher, so altogether

apart, that she never—never could get mixed up with anybody else in my mind!'

'She had better have some very particular sort of curliness in her hair too,' said Sissy. 'Don't you think it would be safer?'

'Oh, this is too much!' he exclaimed. 'It's sport to you, evidently, but you don't consider that it's death to me. I say, come away, and we'll look for this green stuff.'

Fothergill smiled, but Latimer's handsome face flushed. He had made a dozen attempts to supplant Carroll, and had been foiled by the laughing pair. What was the use of being a good-looking fellow of six and twenty, head of one of the county families, and owner of Latimer's Court and Ashendale, if he were to be set aside by a beggarly sailor-boy? What did Fothergill mean by bringing his poor relations dragging after him where they were not wanted? He sprang to his feet, and went away with long strides to make violent love to the farmer's rosy little daughter. He knew that he meant nothing at all, and that he was filling the poor child's head and heart with the vainest of hopes. He knew that he owed especial respect and consideration to the daughter of his tenant, a man who had dealt faithfully by him, and whose father and grandfather had held Ashendale under

the Latimers. He felt that he was acting meanly, even while he kissed little Lucy, by the red wall where the apricots were ripening in the sun. And he had no overmastering passion for excuse—what did he care for little Lucy? He was doing wrong, and he was doing it *because* it was wrong. He was in a fiercely antagonistic mood, and, as he could not fight Fothergill and Carroll, he fought with his own sense of truth and honour, for want of a better foe. And Lucy, conscious of her rosy prettiness, stood shyly pulling the lavender heads, in a glad bewilderment of vanity, wonder, and delight, while Latimer's heart was full of jealous anger. If Sissy Langton could amuse herself, so could he.

But Sissy was too happily absorbed in her amusement to think of his. She had avoided him, as she had avoided Captain Fothergill, from a sense of danger. They were becoming too serious, too much in earnest, and she did not want to be serious. So she went gaily across the grass, laughing at Archie, because he would look on level ground for her maiden-hair spleenwort. They came to a small enclosure.

'Here you are!' said Carroll. 'This is what somebody said was the refectory. It

makes one feel quite sad and sentimental, only to think what a lot of jolly dinners have been eaten here! And nothing left of it all!'

'That's your idea of sentiment, Mr. Carroll? It sounds to me as if you hadn't had enough to eat.'

'Oh yes, I had plenty. But we ought to pledge each other in a cup of sack, or something of the kind. And a place like this ought at least to smell deliciously of roast and boiled. Instead of which it might as well be the chapel.'

Sissy gazed up the wall. 'There's some maiden-hair! How was it I never saw it this morning? Surely we came along the top, and looked down into this place.'

'No,' said Archie. 'That was the chapel we looked into. Didn't I say they were just alike?'

'Well, I can easily get up there,' she said. 'And you may stay down here if you like, and grow sentimental over the ghost of a dinner.' And laughing, she darted up a steep ascent of turf, slackening her pace when she came to a rough heap of fallen stones.

Carroll was by her side directly, helping her. 'Why, this is prettier than where we went this morning!' she said, when they

reached the top; you see the whole place better. But it's narrower, I think. This is the west wall, isn't it? Oh! Mr. Carroll, how much the sun has gone down already!'

'I wish I were Moses, or whoever it was, to make it stop,' said the boy; 'it would stay up there a good long time.'

There was a black belt of shadow at the foot of the wall. Archie looked down as if to measure its breadth. A little tuft of green caught his eye, and stooping he pulled it from between the stones.

'Oh! how broken it is here! Doesn't it look as if a giant had taken a great bite out of it?' Sissy exclaimed, at the moment that he called after her, 'Is this right, Miss Langton?'

She turned her head, and for a second's space he saw her bright face, her laughing, parted lips. Then there was a terrible cry, stretched hands at which he snatched instinctively, but in vain, and a stone which slipped and fell heavily. He stumbled forward and recovered himself with an effort. There was a blank space before him—and what below?

Archie Carroll half scrambled down by the help of the ivy, half slid, and reached the ground. Thus, at the risk of his life, he

gained half a minute, and spent it in kneeling on the grass—a yard away from that which he dared not touch—saying pitifully, 'Miss Langton, oh! won't you speak to me, Miss Langton?'

He was in the shadow, but looking across the enclosure he faced a broken doorway in the south-east corner. The ground sloped away a little, and the arch opened into the stainless blue. A sound of footsteps made Carroll look up, and through the archway came Raymond Fothergill. He had heard the cry, he had outrun the rest, and, even in his blank bewilderment of horror, Archie shrank back scared at his cousin's aspect. His brows and moustache were black as night against the unnatural whiteness of his face, which was like bleached wax. His eyes were terrible. He seemed to reach the spot in an instant. Carroll saw his hands on the stone which had fallen, and lay—on her, O God!—or only on her dress?

Fothergill's features contracted in sudden agony as he noted the horribly twisted position in which she lay; but he stooped without a moment's hesitation, and lifting her gently, laid her on the turf, resting her head upon his knee. There was a strange contrast between the tenderness with which he supported her, and the fierce anger of his face. Others of the

party came rushing on the scene in dismay and horror.

'Water!' said Fothergill. 'Where's Anderson? (Anderson was the young doctor.) 'Not here?'

'He went by the fishponds with Evelyn,' cried Edith suddenly; 'I saw him!' Hardwicke darted off.

'Curse him! Playing the fool when he's wanted more than he ever will be again. Mrs. Latimer!'

Edith rushed away to find her mother.

Some one brought water, and held it while Fothergill, with his disengaged hand, sprinkled the white face on his knee. Walter Latimer hurried round the corner. He held a pink rosebud, on which his fingers tightened unconsciously as he ran. Coming to the staring group he stopped, aghast.

'Good God!' he panted, 'what has happened?'

Fothergill dashed more water on the shut eyes and bright hair. Latimer looked from him to the others standing round. 'What has happened?'

A hoarse voice spoke from the background, 'She fell!' Archie Carroll had risen from his knees, and lifting one hand above his head, he pointed to the wall. Suddenly he met

Fothergill's eyes, and, with a half-smothered cry, he flung himself all along upon the grass, and hid his face.

'Fothergill! is she much hurt?' cried Latimer. 'Is it serious?'

The other did not look up. 'I cannot tell,' he said, 'but I believe she is killed.'

Latimer uttered a cry. 'No! no! For God's sake don't say that! It can't be!'

Fothergill made no answer. 'It isn't possible!' said Walter. But his glance measured the height of the wall, and rested on the stones scattered thickly below. The words died on his lips.

'Is Anderson never coming?' said some one else. Another messenger hurried off. Latimer stood as if rooted to the ground, gazing after him. All at once he noticed the rose which he still held, and jerked it away with a movement as of horror.

The last runner returned. 'Anderson and Hardwicke will be here directly; I saw them coming up the path from the fishponds. Here is Mrs. Latimer.'

Edith ran through the archway first, eager and breathless. 'Here is mamma!' she said, going straight to Raymond Fothergill with her tidings, and speaking softly as if Sissy were asleep. A little nod was his only

answer, and the girl stood gazing with frightened eyes at the drooping head which he supported. Mrs. Latimer, Hardwicke, and Anderson all arrived together, and the group divided to make way for them. The first thing to be done was to carry Sissy to the farmhouse, and while they were arranging this. Edith felt two hands pressed lightly on her shoulders. She turned, and confronted Harry Hardwicke.

'Hush!' he said, 'do not disturb them now; but when they have taken her to the house, if you hear anything said, tell them that I have gone for Dr. Grey, and as soon as I have sent him here, I shall go on for Mrs. Middleton. You understand?' he added, for the child was looking at him with her scared eyes, and had not spoken.

'Yes,' she said, 'I will tell them. Oh, Harry! will she die?'

'Not if anything you and I can do will save her—will she, Edith?' and Hardwicke ran off to the stables for his horse. A man was there who saddled it for him, and a rough farm-boy stood by, and saw how the gentleman, while he waited, stroked the next one—a lady's horse, a chestnut—and how presently he turned his face away, and laid his cheek for a moment against the chestnut's

neck. The boy thought it was a rum go, and stood staring vacantly while Hardwicke galloped off on his terrible errand.

Meanwhile, they were carrying Sissy to the house. Fothergill was helping, of course. Latimer had stood by irresolutely, half afraid, yet secretly hoping for a word which would call him. But no one heeded him. Evelyn and Edith had hurried on to see that there was a bed on which she could be laid, and the sad little procession followed them at a short distance. The lookers-on straggled after it, an anxiously whispering group; and, as the last passed through the ruined doorway, Archie Carroll lifted his head and glanced round. The wall, with its mosses and ivy, rose darkly above him—too terrible a presence to be faced alone. He sprang up, hurried out of the black belt of shadow, and fled across the turf. He never looked back till he stood under the arch, but halting there within sight of his companions, he clasped a projection with one hand as if he were giddy, and, turning his head, gazed intently at the crest of the wall. Every broken edge, every tuft of feathery grass, every aspiring ivy spray, stood sharply out against the sunny blue. The breeze had gone down, and neither blade nor leaf stirred in the hot still-

ness of the air. There was the way by which they had gone up, there was the ruinous gap which Sissy had said was like a giant's bite. Archie's grasp tightened on the stone as he looked. He might well feel stunned and dizzy, gazing thus across the hideous gulf which parted him from the moment when he stood upon the wall with Sissy Langton laughing by his side. Not till every detail was cruelly stamped upon his brain did he leave the spot.

By that time they had carried Sissy in. Little Lucy had been close by, her rosy face blanched with horror, and had looked appealingly at Latimer as he went past. She wanted a kind word or glance, but the innocent confiding look filled him with remorse and disgust. He would not meet it, he stared straight before him. Lucy was overcome by conflicting emotions, went off into hysterics, and her mother had to be called away from the room where she was helping Mrs. Latimer. Walter felt as if he could have strangled the pretty, foolish child, to whom he had been saying sweet things not half an hour before. The rose that he had gathered for her was fastened in her dress, and the pink bud that she had given him lay in its first freshness on the turf in the ruins.

Some of the party waited in the garden. Fothergill stood in the shadow of the porch, silent and a little apart. Archie Carroll came up the path, but no one spoke to him, and he went straight to his consin. Leaning against the woodwork, he opened his lips to speak, but was obliged to stop and clear his throat, for the words would not come. 'How is she?' he said at last.

'I don't know.'

'Why do you look at me like that?' said the boy desperately.

Fothergill slightly changed his position, and the light fell more strongly on his face. 'I don't ever want to look at you again!' he said, with quiet emphasis. 'You've done mischief enough to last your lifetime, if you lived a thousand years.'

'It wasn't my fault! Ray, it wasn't!'

'Whose then?' said Fothergill. 'Possibly you think it would have happened if I had been there?'

'They said that wall——' the young fellow began.

'They didn't! No one told you to climb the most ruinous bit of the whole place. And she didn't even know where the refectory was.'

Carroll groaned. 'Don't Ray; I can't bear it! I shall kill myself!'

'No, you won't!' said Fothergill. 'You'll go safe home to your people at the Rectory. No more of this.'

Archie hesitated, and then miserably dragged himself away. Fothergill retreated a little further into the porch, and was almost lost in the shadow. No tidings, good or evil, had come from the inner room where Sissy lay; but his state of mind was rather despairing than anxious. From the moment when he ran across the grass and saw her lying, a senseless heap, at the foot of the wall he had felt assured that she was fatally injured. If he hoped at all it was an unconscious hope, a hope of which he never would be conscious until a cruel certainty killed it.

His dominant feeling was anger. He had cared for this girl, cared for her so much that he had been astonished at himself for so caring; and he felt that this love was the crown of his life. He did not for a moment doubt that he would have won her. He had triumphed in anticipation, but Death had stepped between them and baffled him, and now it was all over. Fothergill was as furious with Death as if it had been a rival who robbed him. He felt himself the sport of a power to which he could offer no resistance, and the sense of

helplessness was maddening. But his fury was of the white, intense, close-lipped kind. Though he had flung a bitter word or two at Archie, his quarrel was with Destiny. No matter who had decreed this thing, Raymond Fothergill was in fierce revolt.

And yet, through it all, he knew perfectly well that Sissy's death would hardly make any outward change in him. He was robbed of his best chance, but he did not pretend to himself that his heart was broken or that his life was over. Walter Latimer might fancy that kind of thing, but Fothergill knew that he should be much such a man as he had been before he met her, only somewhat lower, because he had so nearly been something higher and missed it. That was all.

Mrs. Latimer came for a few moments out of the hushed mystery of that inner room. The tidings ran through the expectant groups that Sissy had moved slightly, and had opened her eyes once; but there was little hopefulness in the news. She was terribly injured, that much was certain, but nothing more. Mrs. Latimer wanted her son. 'Walter,' she said, 'you must go home and take the girls. Indeed, you must! They cannot stay here, and I cannot send them back without you.' Latimer refused, pro-

tested, yielded. 'Mother,' he said, as he turned to go, 'you don't know——' His voice suddenly gave way.

'I do know—oh, my poor boy!' She passed quickly to where Evelyn stood, and told her that Walter had gone to order the horses. 'I would rather you were all away before Mrs. Middleton comes,' she said; 'Henry Hardwicke has gone for her.'

This departure was a signal to the rest. The groups melted away; and with sad farewells to one another, and awe-struck glances at the windows of the farmhouse, almost all the guests departed. The sound of wheels and horse-hoofs died away in the lanes, and all was very still. The bees hummed busily round the white lilies and the lavender, and on the warm turf of one of the narrow paths lay Archie Carroll.

He had a weight on heart and brain. There had been a moment all blue and sunny, the last of his happy life, when Sissy's laughing face looked back at him, and he was a light-hearted boy. Then had come a moment of horror and incredulous despair, and that black moment had hardened into eternity. Nightmare is hideous, and Archie's very life had become a nightmare. Of course he would get over it, like his cousin,

though, unlike his cousin, he did not think so; and their different moods had their different bitterness. In days to come Carroll would enjoy his life once more, would be ready for a joke or an adventure, would dance the night through, would fall in love. This misery was a swift and terrible entrance into manhood, for he could never be a boy again. And the scar would be left, though the wound would assuredly heal. But Archie, stumbling blindly through that awful pass, never thought that he should come again to the light of day; it was to him as the blackness of a hopeless hell.

CHAPTER XI.

THROUGH THE NIGHT.

THE village clock struck five. As the last lingering stroke died upon the air, there was the sound of a carriage rapidly approaching. Carroll raised his head when it stopped at the gate, and saw Hardwicke spring out, and help a lady to alight. She was an old lady, who walked quickly to the house, looking neither to right nor left, and vanished within the doorway. Hardwicke stopped, as if to give some order to the driver, and then hurried after her. Archie stared vaguely, first at them, and then at the man, who turned his horses and w... round to the stables. When they were out of sight, he laid his head down again. The little scene had been a vivid picture, which stamped itself with curious distinctness on his brain, yet failed to convey any meaning whatever. He had not the faintest idea of

the agony of love and fear in Mrs. Middleton's heart as she passed him. To Archie just then, the whole universe was *his* agony, and there was no room for more.

Ten minutes later came Doctor Grey's brougham. The doctor, as he jumped out, told his man to wait. He went from the gate to the house more hurriedly than Mrs. Middleton, and his anxiety was more marked; but he found time to look round as he went, with keen eyes which rested for an instant on the young sailor, though he lay half hidden by the bushes. He, too, vanished, as the others had vanished.

About an hour later he came out again, and Fothergill followed him. The doctor started when he encountered his eager eyes. Fothergill demanded his opinion. He began some of the usual speeches in which men wrap up the ghastly word 'death,' in such disguise that it can hardly be recognised.

The soldier cut him short: 'Please to speak plain English, Dr. Grey.'

The doctor admitted the very greatest danger.

'Danger—yes,' said Fothergill; 'but is there any hope? I am not a fool—I shan't go in and scare the women—is there any hope?'

The answer was written on the doctor's face. He had known Sissy Langton from the time when she came, a tiny child, to Brackenhill. He shook his head, and murmured something about 'even if there were no other injury—the spine——'

Fothergill caught a glimpse of a hideous possibility, and answered with an oath. It was not the profanity of the words, so much as the fury with which they were charged, that horrified the good old doctor. 'My dear sir,' he remonstrated gently, 'we must remember that this is God's will.'

'God's will—God's will! Are you sure it is'nt the devil's?' said Fothergill. 'It seems more like it. If you think it is God's will, you may persuade yourself it's yours, for aught I know. But I'm not such a damned hypocrite as to make believe it's mine.'

And with mechanical politeness, curiously at variance with his face and speech, he lifted his hat to the doctor, as he turned back to the farmhouse.

So Sissy's doom was spoken. To linger a few hours, more or less, in helpless pain, and then to die. The sun, which had dawned so joyously, was going down as serenely as it had dawned; but it did not matter much to Sissy now. She was sen

sible, she knew Mrs. Middleton. When the old lady stooped over her, she looked up, smiled faintly, and said, 'I fell.'

'Yes, my darling, I know,' Aunt Harriet said.

'Can I go home?' Sissy asked, after a pause.

'No, dear, you must not think of it—you mustn't ask to go home.'

'I thought not,' said Sissy.

Mrs. Middleton asked her if she felt much pain.

'I don't know,' she said, and closed her eyes.

Later Henry Hardwicke sent in a message, and the old lady came out to speak to him. He was standing by an open casement in the passage, looking out at the sunset through the orchard boughs. 'What is it, Harry?' she said.

He started, and turned round. 'I beg your pardon, Mrs. Middleton, but I thought in case you wanted to send any telegrams—if—if—I mean, I thought you might want to send some, and there is not very much time.'

She put her hand to her head. 'I ought to—oughtn't I?' she said. 'Who should be sent for?'

'Mr. Hammond?' Hardwicke questioned, doubtfully.

Something like relief or pleasure lighted her sad eyes. 'Yes—yes; send for Godfrey Hammond. He will come.' She was about to leave him, but the young fellow stepped forward. 'Mrs. Middleton!' Was it the clear red light from the window that suddenly flushed his face? 'Mrs. Middleton, shall I send for Mr. Percival Thorne?'

She stopped, looking strangely at him. Something in his voice surprised her. 'For Percival?' she said.

'May I? I think he ought to come.' The hot colour was burning on his cheeks. What right had he to betray the secret which he believed he had discovered? And yet, could he stand by, and not speak for her, when she had so little time in which to speak for herself?

'Is it for his sake?' said Mrs. Middleton, 'or is it that you think——? Well, let it be so. Send for Percival. Yes,' she added, 'perhaps I have misunderstood. Yes, send at once for Percival.'

'I'll go,' said Harry, hurrying down the passage. 'The message shall be sent off at once. I'll take it to Fordborough.'

'Must you go yourself?' Mrs. Middle-

ton raised her voice a little as he moved away.

'No; let me go,' said Captain Fothergill, turning the further corner. 'I am going to Fordborough. What is it? I will take it. Mrs. Middleton, you will let me be your messenger?'

'You are very good,' she said. 'Harry, you will write—I can't. Oh! I must go back!' And she vanished, leaving the two men face to face.

'I've no telegraph forms,' said Harry, after a pause. 'If you would take the paper to my father, he will send the messages.'

Fothergill nodded silently, and went out to make ready for his journey. Hardwicke followed him and stood in the porch, pencilling on the back of an old letter. When Fothergill had given his orders, he walked up to Carroll, touched the lad's shoulder with the tips of his fingers, and stood away. 'Come,' he said.

Archie raised himself from the ground, and stumbled to his feet. 'Come—where?'

'To Fordborough.'

The boy started and stepped back. He looked at the farmhouse, he looked at his cousin. 'I'll come afterwards,' he faltered.

'Nonsense,' said Fothergill; 'I'm going now, and of course you go with me.'

Archie shrank away, keeping his eyes fixed, as if in a kind of fascination, on his cousin's terrible eyes. The idea of going back, alone with Raymond, was awful to him. 'No; I can't come, Ray, indeed I can't,' he said; 'I'll walk. I'd much rather; I would indeed.'

'What for?' said Fothergill; 'you are doing no good here. Do you know I have a message to take? I can't be kept waiting. Don't be a fool,' he said, in a lower but not less imperative voice.

Archie glanced despairingly round. Hardwicke came forward with the paper in his outstretched hand.

'Leave him here, Captain Fothergill. I dare say I shall go to the inn in the village, and he may go with me. He can take you the earliest news to-morrow morning.'

Archie looked breathlessly from one to the other. 'As you please,' said Fothergill, and strode off without another word. The boy tried to say something in the way of thanks. 'Oh, it's nothing,' Hardwicke replied. 'You won't care what sort of quarters they may turn out to be, I know.' And he went back to the house, with a little shrug of his shoulders, at the idea of having young Carroll tied to him in this fashion. He did

not want the boy, but Hardwicke could never help sacrificing himself.

So Archie went to the gate, and watched his cousin ride away, a slim black figure, on his black horse, against the burning sky. Fothergill never turned his head. Where was the use of looking back? He was intent only on his errand, and when that piece of paper should have been delivered into Mr. Hardwicke's hands, the last link between Sissy Langton and himself would be broken. There would be no further service to render. Fothergill did not know that the message he carried was to summon his rival, but it would have made no difference in his feelings if he had. Nothing made any difference now.

Mrs. Middleton sat by Sissy's bedside in the clear evening light. Harry Hardwicke's words haunted her—why did he think that Sissy wanted Percival? They had parted a year ago, and she had believed that Sissy was cured of her liking for him. It was Sissy who had sent him away, and she had been brighter and gayer of late—indeed, Mrs. Middleton had fancied that Walter Latimer—Well, that was over, but if Sissy cared for Percival——

A pair of widely-opened eyes were fixed on her. 'Am I going to die, Aunt Harriet?'

'I hope not. Oh, my darling, I pray that you may live.'

'I think I am going to die. Will it be very soon? Would there be time to send——'

'We will send for anything, or any one you want. Do you feel worse, dear? Time to send for whom?'

'For Percival?'

'Harry Hardwicke has sent for him already. Perhaps he has the message by now, it is an hour and a half since the messenger went.'

'When will he come?'

'To-morrow, darling.'

There was a pause. Then the faint voice came again. 'What time?'

Mrs. Middleton went to the door, and called softly to Hardwicke, He had been looking in Bradshaw, and she returned directly.

'Percival will come by the express to-night. He will be at Fordborough by the quarter-past nine train, and Harry will meet him, bring him over at once—by ten o'clock, he says, or a few minutes later.'

Sissy's brows contracted for a moment; She was calculating the time. 'What is it now?' she said.

'Twenty minutes to eight.'

Fourteen hours and a half. The whole night between herself and Percival. The darkness must come and must go—the sun must set and must again be high in the heavens, before he could stand by her side. It seemed as if Sissy were going down into the blackness of an awful gulf, where Death was waiting for her. Would she have strength to escape him, to toil up the further side, and to reach the far off to-morrow, and Percival?

'Aunt Harriet,' she said, 'shall I live till then? I want to speak to him.'

'Yes, my darling—indeed you will. Don't talk so. You will break my heart. Perhaps God will spare you——'

'No,' said Sissy. 'No.'

Between eight and nine Hardwicke was summoned again. Mrs. Latimer wanted some one to go to Latimer's Court, to take the latest news, and to say that it was impossible she could return that night. 'You see they went away before Dr. Grey came,' she said. 'I have written a little note. Can you find me a messenger?'

'I will either find one, or I will go myself,' he replied.

'Oh, I didn't mean to trouble you. And

wait a moment, for Mrs. Middleton wants him to go on to her house. She will come and speak to you when I go back to the poor girl.'

'How is Miss Langton?'

'I hardly know. I think she is wandering a little. She talked just now about some embroidery she has been doing—asked for it, in fact.'

'When Dr. Grey was obliged to go, he didn't think there would be any change before he came back, surely,' said Hardwicke anxiously.

'No. But she can't know what she is saying—can she? Poor girl, she will never do another stitch.' Mrs. Latimer fairly broke down. The unfinished embroidery which never could be finished, brought the truth home to her. It is hard to realize that a life, with its interlacing roots and fibres, is broken off short.

'Oh, Mrs. Latimer, don't—don't!' Harry exclaimed, aghast at her tears. 'For Mrs. Middleton's sake!' He rushed away, and returned with wine. 'If you give way, what will become of us?'

She was better in a few minutes, and able to go back, while Harry waited in quiet confidence for Mrs. Middleton. He was not

afraid of a burst of helpless weeping when she came. She was gentle, yielding, delicate, but there was something of the old Squire's obstinacy in her, and in a supreme emergency it came out as firmness. She looked old and frail as she stepped into the passage, and closed the door after her. Her hand shook, but her eyes met his bravely, and her lips were firm.

'You'll have some wine too,' he said, pouring it out as a matter of course. 'You can drink it while you tell me what I am to do.'

She took the glass with a slight inclination of her head, and explained that she wanted an old servant, who had been Sissy's nurse when she was a little child. 'Mrs. Latimer is very kind,' she said. 'But Sissy will like her own people best. And Sarah would be broken-hearted——' She paused 'Here is a list of things that I wish her to bring.'

'Mrs. Latimer thought Miss Langton was not quite herself?' he said inquiringly.

'Do you mean because she talked of her work? Oh, I don't think so. She answers quite sensibly—she speaks quite clearly. That was the only thing.'

'Then is it down in the list—this needlework? Or where is it to be found?'

'You will bring it?' said Mrs. Middleton. 'Well, perhaps——'

'If she should ask again!' he said.

'True. Yes, yes, bring it.' She told him where to find the little case. 'The fancy may haunt her. How am I to thank you, Harry?'

'Not at all,' he said. 'Only let me do what I can.'

It was nearly eleven before Hardwicke had accomplished his double errand, and returned with Sarah. The stars were out, the ruins of the Priory rose in great black masses against the sky, the farmhouse windows, beneath the overhanging eaves, were like bright eyes gazing out into the night. Dr. Grey had come back in the interval, and had seen his patient. There was nothing new to say, and nothing to be done, except to make the path to the grave as little painful as might be. He was taking a nap in Mr. Greenwell's arm-chair, when the young man came in, but woke up, clear and alert, in a moment. 'Ah, you have come,' he said, recognising the old servant. 'That's well. You'll save your mistress a little. Only, mind, we mustn't have any crying. If there is anything of that sort, you will do more harm than good.'

Sarah deigned no reply, but passed on. Mrs. Middleton came out to meet them. Sissy had not spoken. She lay with her eyes shut, and moaned now and then. 'Are you going home, Harry?' said the old lady.

'Only into the village. I've got a room at the Latimer Arms. It isn't two minutes walk from here, so I can be fetched directly, if I'm wanted.'

'And you will be sure to meet the train?'

'I will. You may depend upon me. But I shall come here first.'

'Good-night, then. Go and get some rest.'

Hardwicke went off to look for Archie Carroll. He found him in the square, flagged hall, sitting on the corner of a window-seat, with his head leaning against the frame, among Mrs. Greenwell's geraniums. 'Come along, old fellow,' said Harry.

There was only a glimmering candle, and the hall was very dim. Archie got up submissively, and groped his way after his guide. 'Where are we going?' he asked, as the door was opened.

'To a little public-house close by. We couldn't ask the Greenwells to take us in.'

As they went out into the road, the Priory rose up suddenly on the left and towered

awfully above them. Carroll shuddered, drew closer to his companion, and kept his eyes fixed on the ground. 'I feel as if I were the ghost of myself, and those were the ghosts of the ruins,' he said as he hurried past.

The flight of fancy was altogether beyond Hardwicke. 'You've been sitting alone, and thinking. There has been nothing for you to do, and I couldn't help leaving you. Here we are.'

They turned into the little sanded parlour of the ale-house. Hardwicke had looked in previously and given his orders, and supper was laid ready for them. He sat down and began to help himself, but Archie at first refused to eat.

'Nonsense,' said Harry. 'You have had nothing since the beginning of the day. We must not break down—any of us.' And with a little persuasion he prevailed, and saw the lad make a tolerable supper, and drink some brandy and water afterwards. 'Vile brandy!' said Hardwicke as he set his tumbler down. Archie was leaning with both elbows on the table, gazing at him. His eyes were heavy and swollen, and there were purple shadows below them.

'Mr. Hardwicke,' he said, 'you've been very good to me—do you think it was my fault?'

'Do I think what was your fault?'

'*This!*' Archie said. 'To-day.'

'No! Not if I understand it.'

'Ray said if he had been there——'

'I wish he had been! But we must not expect old heads on young shoulders. How did it happen?'

'We climbed up the wall, and she was saying how narrow and broken it was, and I picked some of that stuff, and called to her, and as she looked back——'

Hardwicke groaned. 'It was madly imprudent,' he said. 'But I don't blame you. You didn't think. Poor fellow, I only hope you won't think too much in future. Come, it's time for bed.'

'I don't want to sleep,' Archie answered. 'I can't sleep.'

'Very well,' said Hardwicke. 'But I must try and get a little rest. They had only one room for us, so if you can't sleep, you'll keep quiet, and let a fellow see what he can do in that line. And you may call me in the morning, if I don't wake. But don't worry yourself, for I shall.'

'What time?' said Carroll.

'Oh, from five to six—not later than six.'

But, in half an hour, it was Carroll who lay, worn out, and sleeping soundly, and

Hardwicke who was counting the slow minutes of that intolerable night.

Sarah had been indignant that Dr. Grey should tell her not to cry. But when Sissy looked up with a gentle smile of recognition, and, instead of calling her by her name, said 'Nurse,' as she used to say in old times, the good woman was very near it indeed, and was obliged to go away to the window to try to swallow the lump that rose up in her throat and almost choked her.

Mrs. Middleton sat by her darling's bedside. She had placed the little work-case in full view, and presently Sissy noticed it, and would have it opened. The half-finished strip of embroidery was laid within easy reach of hand and eye. She smiled, but was not satisfied. 'The case,' she said. Her fingers strayed feebly among the little odds and ends which it contained, and closed over something which she kept.

Then there was a long silence, unbroken till Sissy was thirsty, and wanted something to drink. 'What time?' she said when she had finished.

'Half-past twelve.'

'It's very dark.'

'We will have another candle,' said Aunt Harriet.

'No, the candle only makes me see how dark it is all round.'

Again there was silence, but not so long this time. And again Sissy broke it. 'Aunt Harriet, he is coming now.'

'Yes, darling, he is coming.'

'I feel as if I saw the train, with red lights in front, coming through the night, always coming, but never any nearer.'

'But it *is* nearer every minute. Percival is nearer now than when you spoke.'

Sissy said 'Yes,' and was quiet again, till between one and two. Then Mrs. Middleton perceived that her eyes were open. 'What is it, dear child?' she said.

'The night is so long.'

'Sissy,' said Aunt Harriet softly. 'I want you to listen to me. A year ago, when Godfrey died, and I talked about the money that I hoped to leave you one day, you told me what you should like me to do with it instead, because you had enough, and you thought it was not fair. I didn't quite understand then, and I would not promise. Do you remember?'

'Yes.'

'Sissy, shall I promise now? I've been thinking about it, and I've no wish on earth but to make you happy. Will it make you

happier if I promise now that it shall be as you said?'

'Yes,' said Sissy, with eager eyes.

'Then I do promise. All that is mine to leave he shall have.'

Sissy answered with a smile. 'Kiss me,' she said. And so the promise was sealed. After that the worst of the night seemed somehow to be over. Sissy slept a little, and Aunt Harriet nodded once or twice in the easy chair. Starting into wakefulness after one of these moments, she saw the outline of the window faintly defined in grey, and thanked God that the dawn had come.

CHAPTER XII.

BY THE EXPRESS.

MR. HARDWICKE, not knowing Percival Thorne's precise address, had telegraphed to Godfrey Hammond, begging him to forward the message without delay. A couple of days earlier Hammond had suddenly taken it into his head that he was tired of being in town, and would go away somewhere. In a sort of whimsical amusement at his own mood, he decided that the Land's End ought to suit a misanthrope, and promptly took a ticket for Penzance, as a considerable step in the right direction.

It made no difference to Percival, for Hammond had left full directions with a trustworthy servant, in case any letters should come for Mr. Thorne, and the man sent the message on to Brenthill at once. But it made a difference to Hammond himself. When Hardwicke dispatched the telegram to

his address in town, Godfrey lay on the turf at the Lizard Head, gazing southward across the sunlit sea, while the seabirds screamed, and the white waves broke on the jagged rocks far below.

But with Percival there was no delay. The message found him in Bellevue Street, though he did not return there immediately after his parting with Judith. He wanted the open air, the sky overhead, movement, and liberty, to calm the joyful tumult in heart and brain. He hastened to the nearest point whence he could look over trees and fields. The prospect was not very beautiful. The trees were few, some cropped willows by a mud-banked rivulet, and a group or two of gaunt and melancholy elms. And the fields had a trodden, suburban aspect, which made it hardly needful to stick up boards describing them as eligible building ground. Yet there was grass, such as it was, and daisies sprinkled here and there, and soft cloud-shadows gliding over it. Percival's unreal and fantastic dream had perished suddenly, when Judith put her hand in his. Now, as he walked across these meadows, he saw a new vision, that dream of noble, simple poverty, which, if it could but be realised, would be the fairest of all.

When he returned from his walk, and came once more to the well-known street which he was learning to call 'home,' he was so much calmer that he thought he was quite himself again. Not the languid hopeless self who had lived there once, but a self, young, vigorous, elate, rejoicing in the present, and looking confidently towards the future.

> "This I can tell
> That all will go well,"

was the key-note of his mood. He felt as if he trod on air, as if he had but to walk boldly forward, and every obstacle must give way. The door of No. 13 was open, and a boy, who had brought a telegram, was turning away from it. Hurrying in, with eager eyes, and his face bright with unspoken joy, Percival nearly ran up against Mrs. Bryant and Emma, whose heads were close together over the address on the envelope.

'Lor! Mr. Thorne, how you startled me! It's for you,' said his landlady.

He went up the stairs, two at a time, with his message in his hand. Here was some good news—not for one moment did he dream it could be other than good news—come to crown his day, already the whitest of his life. He tore the paper open, and read it by the

red sunset light, hotly reflected from a wilderness of tiles.

He read it twice—thrice—caught at the window-frame to steady himself, and stood staring vaguely at the smoke which curled upward from a neighbouring chimney. He was stunned. The words seemed to have a meaning, and no meaning. 'This is not how people receive news of death, surely,' he thought. 'I suppose I am in my right senses—or is it a dream?'

He made a strong effort to regain his self-command, but all certainties eluded him. This was not the first time that he had taken up a telegram, and believed that he read the tidings of Sissy's death. He had misunderstood it now as then. It could not be. But why could he not wake?

'Ashendale'—Yes, he remembered Ashendale. He had ridden past the ruins the last day he ever rode with Sissy, the day that Horace came home. It belonged to the Latimers—to Walter Latimer. And Sissy was dying at Ashendale.

All at once he knew that it was no dream. But the keen edge of pain awoke him to the thought of what he had to do, and sent him to hunt among a heap of papers for a time-table. He drew a long breath. The express

started at 10.5, and it was now but twenty minutes past eight.

He caught up his hat and hurried to the office. Mr. Ferguson, who seldom left much before that time, was on the doorstep. While he was getting into his dogcart, Percival hastily explained that he had been summoned on a matter of life and death. 'Sorry to hear it,' said the lawyer as he took the reins—'hope you may find things better than you expect. We shall see you again when you come back.' And with a nod he rattled down the street. Percival stood on the pavement gazing after him, when he suddenly remembered that he had no money. 'I might have asked him to give me my half-week's salary,' he reflected. 'Not that that would have paid my fare.'

A matter of life and death! Sissy waiting for him at Ashendale, and no money to pay for a railway ticket! It would have been absurd, if it had not been horrible. What had he to sell or pawn? By the time he could go to Bellevue Street and return, would not the shops be shut? It was a quarter to nine already. He did not even know where any pawnbroker lived, nor what he could take to him, and the time was terribly short. He was hurrying homewards while these

thoughts passed through his mind, when Judith's words came back to him,—'I have a pound or two to spare, and I feel quite rich.' He took the first turning towards Miss Macgregor's house.

Outside her door he halted for a moment. If they would not let him see Judith, how was he to convey his request? He felt in his pocket, found the telegram, and pencilled below the message, 'Sissy Langton was once to have been my wife—we parted, and I have never seen her since. I have not money enough for my railway fare—can you help me?' He folded it, and rang the bell.

No, he could not see Miss Lisle. She was particularly engaged. 'Very well,' he said. 'Be as good as to take this note to her, and I will wait for the answer.' His manner impressed the girl so much that, although she had been carefully trained by Miss Macgregor, she cast but one hesitating glance at the umbrella stand, before she went on her errand.

Percival waited, eager to be off, yet well assured that it was all right since it was in Judith's hands. Presently the servant returned, and gave him a little packet. The wax of the seal was still warm. He opened it where he stood, and by the light of Miss

Macgregor's hall lamp, read the couple of lines it contained.

'I cannot come, but I send you all the money I have. I pray God you may be in time. Yours, JUDITH.'

There were two sovereigns and some silver. He told the girl to thank Miss Lisle, and went out into the dusk, as the clocks were striking nine. Ten minutes brought him to Bellevue Street, and rushing up to his room he began to put a few things into a little travelling-bag. In his haste he neglected to shut the door, and Mrs. Bryant, whose curiosity had been excited, came upon him in the midst of this occupation.

'And what may be the meaning of this, Mr. Thorne, if I may make so bold as to ask?' she said, eyeing him doubtfully from the doorway.

Percival explained that he had had bad news, and was off by the express.

Mrs. Bryant's darkest suspicions were aroused. She said it was a likely story.

'Why, you gave me the telegram yourself,' he answered indifferently, while he caught up a couple of collars. He was too much absorbed to heed either Mrs. Bryant or his packing.

'And who sent it, I should like to know?'

Percival made no answer, and she began to grumble about people who had money enough to travel all over the country at a minute's notice, if they liked, and none to pay their debts, people who made promises by the hour altogether, and then sneaked off, leaving boxes with nothing inside them, she'd be bound—

Thus baited, Percival at last turned angrily upon her, but, before he could utter a word, another voice interposed.

'What are you always worrying about, Ma? Do come down, and have your supper, and let Mr. Thorne finish his packing. He'll pay you every halfpenny he owes you—don't you know that?' And the door was shut with such decision, that it was a miracle that Mrs. Bryant was not dashed against the opposite wall. 'Come along,' said Lydia, 'there's toasted cheese.'

Percival ran downstairs five minutes later with his bag in his hand. He turned into his sitting room, picked up a few papers, and thrust them into his desk. He was in the act of locking it, when he heard a step behind him, and looking round he saw Lydia. She had a cup of tea, and some bread and butter, which she set down before him. 'You haven't had a morsel since the middle of the

day,' she said. 'Just you drink this—Oh, you must—there's lots of time.'

'Miss Bryant, this is very kind of you, but I don't think——'

'Just you drink it,' said Lydia, 'and eat a bit too, or you'll be good for nothing.' And while Percival hastily obeyed, she glanced round the room. 'Nobody'll meddle with your things while you're gone—don't you trouble yourself.'

'Oh, I didn't suspect that anyone would,' he replied, hardly thinking whether it was likely or not, as he swallowed the bread and butter.

'Well, that was very nice of you, I'm sure. *I* should have suspected a lot if I'd been you,' said Lydia candidly. 'But nobody shall. Now you aren't going to leave that tea. Why, it wants twenty minutes to ten, and not six minutes' walk to the station.'

Percival finished the tea. 'Thank you very much, Miss Bryant.'

'And I say,' Lydia pursued, pulling her curl, with less than her usual consideration for its beauty. 'I suppose you *have* got money enough? Because if not, I'll lend you a little. Don't you mind what Ma says, Mr. Thorne. I know you're all right.'

'You are very good,' said Percival. 'I

didn't expect so much kindness, and I've been borrowing already, so I needn't trouble you. But thank you for your confidence in me, and for your thoughtfulness.' He held out his hand to Lydia, and thus bade farewell to Bellevue Street.

She stood for a moment looking after him. Only a few hours before, she would have rejoiced in any small trouble or difficulty which might have befallen Mr. Thorne. But when he turned round upon her mother and herself, as they stood at his door, her spite had vanished before the sorrowful anxiety of his eyes. She had frequently declared that Mr. Thorne was no gentleman, and that she despised him, but she knew in her heart that he *was* a gentleman, and she was ashamed of her mother's behaviour. Lydia was capable of being magnanimous. provided the object of her magnanimity was a man. I doubt if she could have been magnanimous to a woman. But Percival Thorne was a young and handsome man, and though she did not know what his errand might be, she knew that she was not sending him to Miss Lisle. Standing before his glass, she smoothed back her hair with both hands, arranged the ribbon at her throat, and admired the blue earrings, and a large locket

which she wore suspended from a chain. Even while she thought kindly of Mr. Thorne, and wished him well, she was examining her complexion and her hands, with the eye of a critic. 'I don't believe that last stuff is a mite of good,' she said to herself; 'and it's no end of bother. I might as well pitch the bottle out of window. It was just as well that he'd borrowed the money of some one else, but I'm glad I offered it. I wonder when he'll come back.' And with that Lydia returned to her toasted cheese.

Percival had had a nervous fear of some hindrance on his way to the station. It was so urgent that he should go by this train, that the necessity oppressed him like a nightmare. An earthquake seemed a not improbable thing. He was seriously afraid that he might lose his way, during the five minutes' walk through familiar streets. He imagined an error of half an hour or so in all the Brenthill clocks. He hardly knew what he expected, but he felt it a relief when he came to the station, and found it standing in its right place, quietly awaiting him. He was the first to take a ticket, and the moment the train drew up by the platform, his hand was on the door of a carriage, though, before getting in, he stopped a porter to inquire if

this were the express. The porter answered 'Yes, sir—all right,' with the half smile of superior certainty. What else could it be? Thorne took his place, and waited a few minutes, which seemed an eternity. Then the engine screamed, throbbed, and with quickening speed rushed out into the night.

A man was asleep in one corner of the carriage, otherwise Percival was alone. His nervous anxiety subsided, since nothing further depended upon him till he reached town, and he sat thinking of Sissy, and of that brief engagement which had already receded into a shadowy past. 'It was a mistake,' he mused, 'and she found it out before it was too late. But I believe her poor little heart has been aching for me, lest she wounded me too cruelly that night. It wasn't her fault. She would have hid her fear of me, poor child, if she had been able. And she was so sorry for me in my trouble. I don't think she could be content to go on her way, and take her happiness now, while my life was spoilt and miserable. Poor little Sissy, she will be glad to know——'

And then he remembered that it was to a dying Sissy, that the tidings of marriage and hope must be uttered, if uttered at all. And he sat as it were in a dull dream, trying to

realize how the life which in the depths of his poverty, had seemed to him, so beautiful and safe, was suddenly cut short, and how Sissy at that moment lay in the darkness, waiting—waiting—waiting. The noise of the train took up his thought, and set it to a monotonous repetition of 'Waiting at Ashendale!—Waiting at Ashendale!' If only she might live till he could reach her! He seemed to be hurrying onward, yet no nearer. His overwrought brain caught up the fancy that Death and he were side by side, racing together through the dark, at breathless, headlong speed, to Sissy, where she waited for them both.

Outside, the landscape lay dim and small, dwarfed by the presence of the night. And with the lights burning on its breast, as Sissy saw them in her half waking visions, the express rushed southward across the level blackness of the land, beneath the arch of midnight sky.

CHAPTER XIII.

'Quand on a trouvé ce qu'on cherchait, on n'a pas le temps de le dire : il faut mourir.' J. JOUBERT.

WHEN the grey of the early morning had changed to golden sunlight, and the first faint twittering of the birds gave place to fuller melody, Mrs. Middleton went softly to the window, opened it, and fastened it back. She drew a long breath of the warm air, fresh from the beanfields, and looking down into the little orchard below, she saw Harry Hardwicke, who stepped forward, and looked up at her. She signed to him to wait, and a couple of minutes later she joined him.

'How is she? How has she passed the night?' he asked eagerly.

'She is no worse. She has lived through it bravely, with one thought—you were very right to send for Percival.'

Hardwicke looked down, and coloured as he had coloured when he spoke of him

before. 'I'm glad,' he said. 'I'm off to fetch him in about an hour and a half.'

'Nothing from Godfrey Hammond?' she asked after a pause.

'No. I'll ask at my father's as I go by. He will either come, or we shall hear, unless he is out.'

'Of course,' the old lady answered. 'Godfrey Hammond would not fail me. And now goodbye, Harry, till you bring Percival.'

She went away as swiftly and lightly as she had come a minute before, and left Hardwicke standing on the turf under the apple trees, gazing up at the open casement. A June morning, sun shining, soft winds blowing, a young lover under his lady's window—it should have been a perfect poem. And the lady within lay crushed and maimed, dying in the very heart of her June!

Hardwicke let himself out through the little wicket gate, and went back to the Latimer Arms. He entered the bedroom without disturbing Archie, who lay, with his sunburnt face on the white pillow, smiling in his sleep. He could not find it in his heart to arouse him. The boy's lips parted, he murmured a word or two, and

seemed to sink into a yet deeper slumber. Hardwicke went softly out, gave the landlady directions about breakfast, and returned, watch in hand. 'I suppose I must,' he said to himself.

But he stopped short. Carroll stirred, stretched himself, his eyes were half open, evidently his waking was a pleasant one. But suddenly the unfamiliar aspect of the room attracted his attention, he looked eagerly round, a shadow swept across his face, and he turned and saw Hardwicke. 'It's true!' he said, and flung out his arms in a paroxysm of despair.

Harry walked to the window and leant out. Presently a voice behind him asked, 'Have you been to the farm, Mr. Hardwicke?'

'Yes,' said Harry. 'But there is no news. She passed a tolerably quiet night. There is no change.'

'I've been asleep,' said Archie, after a pause. 'I never thought I should sleep.' He looked ashamed of having done so.

'It would have been strange if you hadn't. You were worn out.'

'My watch has run down,' the other continued. 'What is the time?'

'Twenty minutes past seven. I want to

speak to you, Carroll. I think you had better go home.'

'Home? To Fordborough? To Raymond?'

'No—really home, to your own people. You can write to your cousin. You don't want to go back to him?'

Archie shook his head. Then a sudden sense of injustice to Fothergill prompted him to say, 'Ray was never hard on me before.'

'You musn't think about that,' Hardwicke replied. 'People don't weigh their words at such times. But, Carroll, you can do nothing here,—less than nothing. You'll be better away. Give me your address, and I'll write—any news there is. Look sharp now, and you can go into Fordborough with me, and catch the up-train.'

As they drove through the green lanes, along which they had passed the day before, Archie looked right and left, recalling the incidents of that earlier drive. Already he was better, possessing his sorrow with greater keenness and fulness than at first, but not so miserably possessed by it. Hardly a word was spoken till they stood on the platform, and a far-off puff of white showed the coming train. Then he said, 'I shall never forget

your kindness, Mr. Hardwicke. If ever there's anything I can do——'

'You'll do it,' said Harry with a smile.

'That I will! And you'll write?'

Hardwicke answered 'Yes.' He knew too well *what* it was he promised to write, to say a word more.

It was a relief to him when Carroll was gone, and he could pace the platform, and watch for the London train. He looked through the open doorway, and saw his dog-cart waiting in the road, and the horse tossing his head impatiently in the sunshine. Through all his anxiety, or rather, side by side with his anxiety, he was conscious of a current of interest in all manner of trivial things. He thought of the price he had given for the horse, five months before, and of Latimer's opinion of his bargain. He noticed the station-master in the distance, and remembered that some one had said he drank. He watched a row of small birds sitting on the telegraph wires, just outside the station, and all at once the London train came gliding rapidly and unexpectedly out of the cutting close by, and was there.

A hurried rush along the line of carriages, with his heart sinking lower at every step, a despairing glance round, and he perceived

the man he came to meet walking off at the further end of the platform. He came up with him as he stopped to speak to a porter.

'Ah! I am in time then?' said Percival, when he looked round in reply to Hardwicke's hurried greeting.

'Yes—thank God! I promised to drive you over to Ashendale at once.'

Percival nodded, and took his place without a word. Not till they were fairly started on their journey did he turn to his companion. 'How did it happen?' he asked.

Hardwicke gave him a brief account of the accident. He listened eagerly, and then just saying 'It's very dreadful,' he was silent again. But it was the silence of a man intent on his errand, leaning slightly forward as if drawn by a powerful attraction, and with eyes fixed on the point where he would first see the ruins of Ashendale Priory above the trees. Hardwicke did not venture to speak to him. As the man whom Sissy Langton loved, Percival Thorne was to him the first of men, but, considered from Hardwicke's own point of view, he was a fellow with whom he had little or nothing in common, a man who quoted poetry, and saw all manner of things in pictures and ruins, who went out of his way to think about politics,

and was neither Conservative nor Radical when all was done, a man who rather disliked dogs, and took no interest in horses. Hardwicke did not want to speak about dogs, horses, or politics then, but the consciousness of their want of sympathy was in his mind.

As they drove through the village they caught a passing glimpse of a brougham. 'Ha! Brackenhill," said Thorne, looking after it. They dashed round a corner, and pulled up in front of the farmhouse. Hardwicke took no pains to spare the noise of their arrival. He knew very well that the sound of wheels would be music to Sissy's ears.

A tall slim figure, which even on that June morning had the air of being wrapped up, passed and repassed in the hall within. As the two young men came up the path, Horace appeared in the porch. Even at that moment the change which a year had wrought in him startled Percival. He was a mere shadow. He had looked ill before, but now he looked as if he were dying.

'She will not see me,' he said to Hardwicke. His voice was that of a confirmed invalid, a mixture of complaint and helplessness. He ignored his cousin.

'She will see you now that Percival has

come,' said Mrs. Middleton, advancing from the background. 'She will see you together.'

And she led the way. Horace went in second, and Percival last, yet he was the first to meet the gaze of those waiting eyes. The young men stood side by side, looking down at the delicate face on the pillow. It was pale, and seemed smaller than usual, in the midst of the loosened waves of hair. On one side of the forehead there was a dark mark, half wound, half bruise, a mere nothing but for its terrible suggestiveness. But the clear eyes and the gentle little mouth were unchanged. Horace said 'Oh Sissy!' and Sissy said 'Percival.' He could not speak, but stooped and kissed the little hand which lap passively on the coverlet.

'Whisper,' said Sissy. He bent over her. 'Have you forgiven him?' she asked.

'Yes.' The mere thought of enmity was horrible to him, as he looked into Sissy's eyes, with that spectral Horace by his side.

'Are you sure? Quite?'

'Before God and you, Sissy.'

'Tell him so, Percival.'

He stood up, and turned to his cousin. 'Horace?' he said, and held out his hand. The other put a thin hot hand into it. 'See here, Sissy,' said Percival. 'We are friends,'

'Yes, we're friends,' Horace repeated. 'Has it vexed you, Sissy? I thought you didn't care about me. I'm sorry, dear; I'm very sorry.'

Aunt Harriet, standing by, laid her hand on his arm. She had held aloof for that long year, feeling that he was in the wrong. He had not acted as a Thorne should, and he could never be the same to her as in old days. But she had wanted her boy, nevertheless, right or wrong, and since Percival had pardoned him, and since it was partly Godfrey's hardness that had driven him into deceit, and since he was so ill, and since—and since—she loved him, she drew his head down to her, and kissed him. Horace was weak, and he had to turn his face away, and wipe his eyes. But, relinquishing Percival's hand, he held Aunt Harriet's.

Percival stooped again, in obedience to a sign from Sissy. 'Ask him to forgive me,' she said.

'He knows nothing, dear.'

'Ask him for me.'

'Horace,' said Percival, 'Sissy wants your forgiveness.'

'I've nothing to forgive,' said Horace. 'It is I who ought to ask to be forgiven. It was hard on me when first you came to

Brackenhill, Percy; but it has been harder on you since. I hardly know what I said or did that day. I thought you'd been plotting against me.'

'No—no,' said Sissy. 'Not he.'

'No, but I did think so. Since then I've felt that, anyhow, it was not fair. I suppose I was too proud to say so, or hardly knew how, especially as the wrong is past mending. But I do ask your pardon now.'

'You have it,' said Percival. 'We didn't understand each other very well.'

'But I never blamed you, Sissy; never, for one moment. I wasn't so bad as that. I've watched for you now and then in Fordborough streets, just to get a glimpse as you went by, I thought it was you who would never forgive me, because of Percival.'

'He has forgiven,' said Sissy. But her eyes still sought Percival's.

'Look here, Horace,' he said. 'There was a misunderstanding you knew nothing of, and Sissy feels that she might have cleared it up. It *was* cleared up at last, but I think it altered my grandfather's manner to you for a time. If you wish to know the whole, I will tell you. But since it is all over and done with, and did not really do you any harm, if you like best'—he looked

steadily at Horace—'that we should forgive and forget on both sides, we will bury the past here to-day.'

'Yes—yes,' said Horace. 'Sissy may have made a mistake, but she never meant me any harm, I know.'

'Don't—don't! O, Horace, I did—but I am sorry.'

'God knows I forgive you, whatever it was,' he said.

'Kiss me, Horace.'

He stooped and kissed her, as he had kissed her many a time, when she was his little pet and playmate. She kissed him back again, and smiled. 'Good-bye, Horry!'

Mrs. Middleton interposed. 'This will be too much for her,' she said. 'Percival, she wants you, I see—be careful.' And she drew Horace gently away.

Percival sat down by the bedside. Presently Sarah came in, and went to the further end of the room, waiting, in case she should be wanted. Sissy was going to speak once, but Percival stopped her: 'Lie still a little while, dear—I'm not going away.'

She lay still, looking up at this Percival for whom she had watched and waited through the dreary night, and who had come

to her with the morning. And he, as he sat by her side, was thinking how, at that time the day before, he was in the office at Brenthill. He could hardly believe that less than twenty-four hours had given him the assurance of Judith's love, and brought him to Sissy's death-bed. He was in a strangely exalted state of mind. His face was calm, as if cast in bronze, but a crowd of thoughts and feelings contended for the mastery beneath it. He had eaten nothing since the night before, and had not slept, but his excitement sustained him.

He met Sissy's eyes, and smiled tenderly. How was it that he had frightened her in old days? Could he ever have been cruel to one so delicate and clinging? Yet he must have been, since he had driven away her love. She was afraid of him; she had begged to be free. Well, the past was past; but at least no word nor look of his should frighten or grieve the poor child now.

After a time, she spoke. 'You have worked too hard. Isn't it that you wanted to do something great?'

'That isn't at all likely,' said Percival, with a melancholy smile. 'I'm all right, Sissy.'

'No—you are pale. You wanted to

surprise us. Oh, I guessed! Godfrey Hammond didn't tell me. I should have been glad if I could have waited to see it.'

'Don't talk so,' he entreated. 'There will be nothing to see.'

'You mustn't work too hard—promise,' she whispered.

'No, dear, I won't.'

'Percival, will you be good to me?'

'If I can, I will indeed. What can I do?'

'I want you to have my money. It is my own, and I have nobody.' Sissy remembered the terrible mistake she had once made, and wanted an assurance from his own lips that her gift was accepted.

Percival hesitated for a moment, and even the moment's hesitation alarmed her. It was true, as she said, that she had nobody, and her words opened a golden gateway before Judith and himself. Should he tell her of that double joy and double gratitude? He believed that she would be glad; but it seemed selfish and horrible to talk of love and marriage by that bedside. 'I wish you might live to need it all yourself, dear,' he answered, and laid his hand softly on hers. The strip of embroidery caught his eye. 'What's this?' he said in blank surprise.

'And your thimble! Sissy, you mustn't bother yourself about this work now.' He would have drawn it gently away.

The fingers closed on it suddenly, and the weak voice panted—'No! Percival! It's mine. That was before we were engaged. You spoilt my other.'

'O God!' he said. In a moment it all came back to him. He remembered the summer day at Brackenhill—Sissy and he upon the terrace—the work-box upset, and the thimble crushed beneath his foot. He remembered her pretty reproaches, and their laughter over her enforced idleness. He remembered how he rode into Fordborough, and bought that little gold thimble—the first present he ever made her. All his gifts during their brief engagement had been scrupulously returned; but this, as she had said, was given before. And she was dying with it in her hand. She had loved him from first to last.

'Percival, you will take my money?' she pleaded, fearing some incomprehensible scruple.

'For God's sake, Sissy! I must think a moment.' He buried his face in his hands.

'Oh, you are cruel!' she whispered.

How could he think? Sissy loved him—had always loved him. It was all plain to

him now. He had been blind; and he had come back to find out the truth, the day after he had pledged himself to Judith Lisle.

'Don't be unkind to me, Percival; I can't bear it, dear.'

How could he stab her to the heart by a refusal of that which he so sorely needed? How could he tell her of his engagement? How could he keep silence, and take her money, to spend it with Judith?

'Say "Yes," Percival. It is mine. Why not? why not?'

He spoke through his clasped hands: 'One moment more.'

'I shall never ask you anything again,' she whispered. 'O Percival, be good to me!'

He raised his head and looked earnestly at her. He must be true, happen what might.

'Sissy, God knows I thank you for your goodness. I shan't forget it, living or dying. If only you might be spared——'

'No—No. Say "Yes," Percival.'

'I will say "yes" if, when I have done, you wish it still. But it must be "yes" for some one besides myself. Dear, don't give it to me to make amends in any way. You have not wronged me, Sissy. Don't give it

to me, dear, unless you give it to Judith Lisle.'

As he spoke he looked into her eyes. Their sweet entreaty gave place to a flash of pained reproach, as if they said, 'So soon?' Then the light in them wavered, and went out. Percival sprang up. 'Help—she has fainted!'

Sarah hurried from her post by the window, and the sound of quick footsteps brought back Mrs. Middleton. The young man stood aside, dismayed. 'She isn't dead?' he said in a low voice.

Aunt Harriet did not heed him. A horrible moment passed, during which he felt himself a murderer. Then Sissy moaned, and turned her face a little to the wall.

'Go now—she cannot speak to you,' said Mrs. Middleton.

"I can't. Only one more word!'

'What do you mean? What have you done? You may wait outside, and I will call you. She cannot bear any more now—do you want to kill her outright?'

He went. There was a wide window-seat in the passage, and he dropped down upon it, utterly worn out and wretched. 'What have I done?' he asked himself. 'What made me do it? She loved me and

I have been a brute to her. If I had been a devil, could I have tortured her more?'

Presently Mrs. Middleton came to him. 'She cannot see you now, but she is better.'

He looked up at her as he sat. 'Aunt Harriet, I meant it for the best. Say what you like—I was a brute, I suppose, but I thought I was doing right."

'What do you mean?' Her tone was gentler. She detected the misery in his.

Percival took her hand and laid it on his forehead. 'You can't think I meant to be cruel to Sissy,' he said. 'You will let me speak to her?'

She softly pushed back his hair. After all, he was the man Sissy loved. 'What was it?' she asked, 'what did you do?'

He looked down. 'I'm going to marry Miss Lisle,' he said.

She started away from him. 'You told her that? God forgive you, Percival!'

'I should have been a liar if I hadn't.'

'Couldn't you let her die in peace? It is such a little while. Couldn't you have waited till she was in her grave?'

'Will she see me? Just one word, Aunt Harriet.' And yet while he pleaded, he did not know what the one word was that he

would say. Only he felt that he must see her once more.

'Not now,' said Mrs. Middleton. 'My poor darling shall not be tortured any more. Later on—if she wishes it—but not now. She could not bear it.'

'But you will ask her to see me later,' he entreated. 'I must see her.'

'What is she to you? She is all the world to me, and she shall be left in peace. It is all that I can do for her now. You have been cruel to her always—always. She has been breaking her heart for you—she lived through last night with the hope of your coming. Oh, Percival, God knows I wish we had never called you away from Miss Lisle!'

'Don't say that!'

'Go back to her,' said Aunt Harriet, 'and leave my darling to me. We were happy at Brackenhill till you came there!'

He sprang to his feet. 'Aunt Harriet! Have some mercy! You know I would die if it could make Sissy any happier!'

'And Miss Lisle?' she said.

He turned away with a groan, and, leaning against the wall, put his hand over his eyes. Mrs. Middleton hesitated a moment, but her haste to return to Sissy triumphed over any

relenting feelings, and she left him, pausing only at the door to make sure of her calmness.

Noon came and passed. Sissy had spoken once to bid them take the needlework away. 'I've done with it,' she said. Otherwise she was silent, and only looked at them with gentle, apathetic eyes, when they spoke to her. Dr. Grey came and went again. On his way out he noticed Percival, looked keenly at him, but said nothing.

Henry Hardwicke's desire to be useful had prompted him to station himself on the road, a short distance from the farm, at the turning from the village. There he stopped people coming to inquire, and gave the latest intelligence. It was weary work, lounging there by the wayside, but he hoped he was serving Sissy Langton to the last. He could not even have a cigar, to help to pass the time, for he had an idea that Mrs. Middleton disliked the smell of smoke. He stared at the trees and the sky, drew letters in the dust with the end of a stick, stirred up a small ants' nest, examined the structure of a blackberry blossom or two, and some buttercups, and compared the flavours of different leaves. He came forward as Dr. Grey went by. The doctor stopped to tell him that Miss Langton was certainly weaker. 'But she may

linger some hours yet,' he added, and he was going on his way, when a thought seemed to strike him. 'Are you staying at the farm?' he asked.

'No—they've enough without me. I'm at the public-house close by.'

'Going there for some luncheon?'

Hardwicke supposed so.

'Can't you get young Thorne to go with you? He looks utterly exhausted.'

Hardwicke went off on his mission, but he could not persuade him to stir. 'All right,' he said at last, 'then I shall bring you something to eat here.' Percival agreed to that compromise, and owned afterwards that he felt better for the food he had taken.

The slow hours of the afternoon went wearily by. The rector of Fordborough came. Dr. Grey came again. Mrs. Latimer passed two or three times. The sky began to grow red towards the west once more, and the cawing rooks flew homeward, past the window where Percival sat, waiting vainly for the summons which did not come.

Hardwicke, released from his self-imposed duty, came to see if Percival would go with him for half an hour or so, to the 'Latimer Arms.' 'I've got a kind of tea-dinner,' he said, 'chops and that sort of thing. You'd

better have some.' But it was of no use. So when he came back, the good-natured fellow brought some more provisions, and begged Lucy Greenwell to make some tea, which he carried up.

'Where are you going to spend the night?' asked Harry, coming up again when he had taken away the cup and plate.

'Here,' said Percival. He sat with his hands clasped behind his head, and one leg drawn up on the seat. His face was sharply defined against the square of sunset sky. Hardwicke stood with his hands in his pockets, looking down at him. 'But you can't sleep here,' he said.'

'That doesn't matter much. Sleeping or waking, here I stay.'

A sudden hope flashed in his eyes, for the door of Sissy's room opened, and, closing it behind her, Mrs. Middleton came out, and looked up and down the passage. But she called 'Harry,' in a low voice, and Percival leant back again.

Harry went. Mrs. Middleton had moved a little further away, and stood with her back towards Percival, and one hand pressed against the wall to steady herself. Her first question was an unexpected one.

'Isn't the wind getting up?' Her eyes

were frightened, and her voice betrayed her anxiety.

'I don't know—not much, I think.' He was taken by surprise, and hesitated a little.

'It is! Tell me the truth.'

'I am—I will,' he stammered. 'I haven't thought about it. There is a pleasant little breeze, such as often comes in the evening. I don't really think there's any more.'

'It isn't rising then?'

'Wait a minute,' said Hardwicke, and hurried off. He did not in the least understand his errand, but it was enough for him that Mrs. Middleton wanted to know. If she had asked him the depth of water in the well, or the number of trees on the Priory farm, he would have rushed away with the same eagerness to satisfy her. His voice was heard in the porch, alternating with deeper, and less carefully restrained tones. Then there was a sound of steps on the gravel path. Presently he came back. Mrs. Middleton's attitude was unchanged, except that she had drawn a little closer to the wall. But though she had never looked over her shoulder she was uneasily conscious of the young man, half sitting, half lying, in the window-seat behind her.

'Greenwell says it won't be anything,' Hardwicke announced. 'The glass has been

slowly going up all yesterday and to-day, and it is rising still. He believes we have got a real change in the weather, and that it will keep fine for some time.'

'Thank God!' said Mrs. Middleton. 'Do you think I'm very mad?'

'Not I,' Harry answered, in a 'Their's not to reason why' manner.

'A week or two ago,' she said, 'my poor darling was talking about dying, as you young folks will talk, and she said she hoped she should not die in the night, when the wind was howling round the house. A bitter winter night would be worst of all, she said. It won't be *that*, but I fancied the wind was getting up, and it frightened me to think how one would hear it moaning in this old place. It is only a fancy, of course, but she might have thought of it again, lying there.'

Hardwicke could not have put it into words, but the fancy came to him, too, of Sissy's soul flying out into the windy waste of air.

'Of course it is nothing—it is nonsense,' said Mrs. Middleton. 'But if it might be as she said, when it is warm and light—if it might be!' She stopped with a catching in her voice.

Harry, in his matter of fact way, offered consolation. 'Dear Mrs. Middleton, the sun

will rise by four, and Greenwell says there won't be any wind.'

'Yes, yes, and she may not remember.'

'I hope you have been taking some rest,' he ventured to say after a brief silence.

'Yes. I was lying down this afternoon, and Sarah will take part of the night.' She paused, and spoke again in a still lower tone. 'Couldn't you persuade him to go away?'

'Mr. Thorne?'

She nodded. 'I will not have her troubled. I asked her if she would see him again, and she said 'No.' I wish he would go. What is the use of his waiting there?'

Hardwicke shrugged his shoulders. 'It is useless for me to try and persuade him. He won't stir for me.'

'I would send for him if she wanted him. But she won't.'

'I'll speak to him again, if you like,' said Harry, 'though it won't do any good.'

Nor did it, when a few minutes later the promised attempt was made. 'I shall stay here,' said Percival, in a tone which conveyed unconquerable decision, and Hardwicke was silenced. The Greenwells came later, regretting that they had not a room to offer Mr. Thorne, but suggesting the sofa in the parlour, or a mattress on the floor somewhere. Percival,

however, declined everything with such courteous resolution, that at last he was left alone.

Again the night came on, with its shadows and its stillness, and the light burning steadily in the one room. To all outward seeming it was the same as it had been twenty-four hours earlier; but Mrs. Middleton, watching by the bedside, was conscious of a difference. Life was at a lower ebb: there was less eagerness and unrest, less of hope and fear, more of a drowsy acquiescence. And Percival, who had been longed for so wearily the night before, seemed to be altogether forgotten.

Meanwhile, he kept his weary watch outside. He said to himself that he had darkened Sissy's last day—he cursed his cruelty; and yet, could he have done otherwise? He was haunted, through the long hours of the night, by the words which had been ever on his lips when he won her—

> If she love me, this believe,
> I will die ere she shall grieve—

and he vowed that never was man so forsworn as he. Yet his one desire had been to be true. Had he not worshipped Truth? And this was the end of all.

His cruelty, too, had been worse than useless. He had lost this chance of an independence, as he had lost Brackenhill. He

hated himself for thinking of money then, yet he could not help thinking of it—could not help being aware that Sissy's entreaty to him to take her fortune was worth nothing unless a will were made, and that there had been no mention of such a thing since she spoke to him that morning. And he was so miserably poor. Of whom should he borrow the money to take him back to his drudgery at Brenthill? Well, since Sissy no longer cared for his future, it was well that he had spoken. Better poverty than treachery. Let the money go; but, oh, to see her once again, and ask her to forgive him!

As the night crept onward, he grew drowsy, and slept by snatches, lightly and uneasily, walking with sudden starts to a consciousness of the window at his side—a loophole into a ghostly sky, where shreds of white cloud were driven swiftly before the breeze. The wan crescent of the moon gleamed through them from time to time, showing how thin and phantom-like they were, and how they hurried on their way across the heavens. After a time the clouds, and moon, and midnight sky were mingled with Percival's dreams, and towards morning he fell fast asleep.

Again Aunt Harriet saw the first grey

gleam of dawn. Slowly it stole in, widening and increasing, till the candle-flame, which had been like a golden star, shining out into the June night, was but a smoky yellow smear on the saffron morning. She rose, and put it out. Turning, she encountered Sissy's eyes. They looked from her to a window at the foot of the bed. 'Open,' said Sissy.

Mrs. Middleton obeyed. The sound of unfastening the casement awoke Sarah, who was resting in an easy-chair. She sat up, and looked round.

The breeze had died away, as Harry had foretold it would; and that day had dawned as gloriously as the two that had preceded it. A lark was soaring and singing—a mere point in the dome of blue.

Sissy lay, and looked awhile. Then she said, 'Brackenhill?'

Aunt Harriet considered for a moment before she replied, 'A little to the right, my darling.'

The dying eyes were turned a little to the right. Seven miles away—yet the old grey manor-house rose before Aunt Harriet's eyes, warm on its southern slope, with its shaven lawns, and whispering trees, and the long terrace with its old stone balustrade. Perhaps Sissy saw it too.

'Darling, it is warm and light,' the old lady said at last.

Sissy smiled. Her eyes wandered from the window. 'Aunt, you promised,' she whispered.

'Yes, dear; yes, I promised.

There was a pause. Suddenly Sissy spoke, more strongly and clearly than she had spoken for hours. 'Tell Percival—my love to Miss Lisle.'

'Fetch him,' said Mrs. Middleton to Sarah, with a quick movement of her hand towards the door. As the old woman crossed the room, Sissy looked after her. In less than a minute Percival came in. His dark hair was tumbled over his forehead, and his eyes, though passionately eager, were heavy with sleep. As he came forward, Sissy looked up, and repeated faintly, like an echo—'My love to Miss Lisle. Percival!' Her glance met his, and welcomed him. But even as he said 'Sissy!' her eyes closed; and when, after a brief interval, they opened again, he was conscious of a change. He spoke, and took her hand, but she did not heed. 'She does not know me!' he said.

Her lips moved, and Aunt Harriet stooped to catch the faint sound. It was something about 'Horry—coming home from school.'

Hardly knowing what she said—only longing for one more look, one smile of recognition, one word—Aunt Harriet spoke, in painfully distinct tones. 'My darling, do you want Horace? Shall we send for Horace?'

No answer. There was a long pause, and then the indistinct murmur recommenced. It was still 'Horry,' and 'Rover;' and presently they thought she said 'Langley Wood.'

'Horace used to take her there for a treat,' said Mrs. Middleton. 'Oh Sissy, don't you know Aunt Harriet?'

Still, from time to time, came the vague murmur of words. It was dark—the trees—she had lost—

Percival stood in silent anguish. There was to him a bitterness, worse than the bitterness of death, in the sound of those faint words. Sissy was before him, yet she had passed away into the years when she did not know him. He might cry for her, but she would not hear. There was no word for him, the Sissy who had loved him, and pardoned him, was dead. This was the child Sissy, with whom Horace had played at Brackenhill.

The long bright morning seemed an eternity of blue sky, softly rustling leaves,

birds singing, and golden chequers of sunlight falling on walls and floor. Dr. Grey came in, and stood near. The end was at hand, and yet delayed. The sun was high before the faint whispers of 'Auntie,' and 'Horry,' ceased altogether; and even then there was an interval during which Sissy still breathed, still lingered in the border-land between living and dying. Eagerly though they watched her, they could not tell the moment when she left them.

It was late that afternoon. Hardwicke lounged, with his back against the gate of the orchard, and his hands in his pockets. When he lifted his eyes from the turf on which he stood, he could see the white blankness of a closed window through the boughs.

He was sorely perplexed. Not ten minutes earlier Mrs. Latimer had been there, saying, 'Something should be done—why does not Mr. Thorne go to her? Or could Dr. Grey say anything, if he were sent for? I'm sure it isn't right that she should be left so.'

Mrs. Middleton was alone with her dead in that darkened room. She was perfectly calm and tearless. She only demanded to be left to herself. Mrs. Latimer would have gone in, to cry and sympathise, but she was

repulsed with a decision which was almost fierce. Sarah was not to disturb her. She wanted nothing. She wanted nobody. She must be by herself. She was terrible in her lonely misery.

Hardwicke felt that it could not be his place to go. Somewhere in the Priory ruins was Percival Thorne, hiding his sorrow and himself—should he find him, and persuade him to make the attempt? But Harry had an undefined feeling that Mrs. Middleton did not want Percival.

He stood, kicking at a daisy root in the grass, feeling himself useless, yet unwilling to desert his post, when a hand was pressed on his shoulder, and he started round. Godfrey Hammond was on the other side of the gate, looking just as cool and colourless as usual.

'Thank God you're come, Mr. Hammond!' Harry exclaimed, and began to pour out his story in such haste, that it was a couple of minutes before Godfrey fully understood him. The new comer listened attentively, asking a question or two. He brushed some imperceptible dust from his grey coat sleeve, and sticking his glass in his eye, he surveyed the farmhouse.

'I think I should like to see Mrs. Mid-

dleton at once,' he said, when Hardwicke had finished.

Sarah showed him the way, but he preferred to announce himself. He knocked at the door.

'Who is there?' said the voice within.

'It is I—Godfrey Hammond—I may come in?'

'Yes.'

He opened the door and saw her sitting by the bedside, where something lay white, and straight, and still. She turned her head as he entered, then stood up, and came a step or two to meet him. 'Oh Godfrey!' she said in a low voice, 'she died this morning.'

He put his arm about her. 'I would have been here before, if I could,' he said.

'I knew it.' She trembled so much that he drew her nearer, supporting her as tenderly as if he were her son, though his face above her was unmoved as ever.

'She died this morning,' Mrs. Middleton repeated. She hid her face suddenly, and burst into a passion of tears. 'Oh Godfrey! she was hurt so! She was hurt so! Oh my darling!'

'We could not wish her to linger in pain,' he said softly.

'No, no. But only this morning, and I feel as if I had been alone for years!'

Still, through her weeping, she clung to him. His sympathy made a faint glimmer of light in the darkness, and her sad eyes turned to it.

CHAPTER XIV.

AFTERWARDS.

THERE is little more to write. Four years, with their varying seasons, their endless procession of events, their multitude of joys and sorrows, have passed since Sissy died. Her place in the world, which seemed so blank and strange in its first vacancy, is closed up, and lost in the crowding occupations of ordinary life. She is not forgotten, but she has passed out of the light of common day into the quiet world of years gone by, where there is neither crowd nor haste, but soft shadows, and shadowy sunshine, and time for every tender memory and thought. Even Aunt Harriet's sorrow is patient and subdued, and she sees her darling's face, with other long lost faces, softened as in a gentle dream. She looks back to the past with no pain of longing. At seventy-eight, she believes that she is nearer to those she loves, by going forward

yet a little further. Nor are these last days sad, for in her loneliness Godfrey Hammond persuaded her to come to him, and she is happy in her place by his fireside. He is all that is left to her, and she is wrapped up in him. Nothing is good enough for Godfrey, and he says, with a smile, that she would make the planets revolve round him if she could. It is very possible that, if she had her will, she might attempt some little re-arrangement of that kind. Her only fear is lest she should ever be a burden to him. But that will never be. Godfrey likes her delicate, old-fashioned ways and words, and is glad to see the kind old face which smiled on him long ago when he was a lad, lighted up with gentle pleasure in his presence now. When he bids her good-night he knows that she will pray before she lies down, and he feels as if his home and he were the better for those simple prayers, uttered night and morning in an unbroken sequence of more than seventy years. There is a tranquil happiness in that house, like the short, golden days of a St. Martin's summer, or the November blooming of a rose.

In the February after Sissy's death, Godfrey went to Rookleigh for a day, to be present at a wedding in the old church, where

the bridegroom had once lingered idly in the hot summer-time, and pictured his marriage to another bride. That summer afternoon was not forgotten. Percival, standing on the uneven pavement above the Shadwells' vault, remembered his vision of Sissy's frightened eyes, even while he uttered the words that bound him to Judith Lisle. But those words were not the less true because the thought of Sissy was hidden in his heart for ever.

Since that day, Percival has spent almost all his time abroad, leading such a life as he pictured long ago, only the reality is fairer than the day-dream, because Judith shares it with him. Together they travel, or linger, as the fancy of the moment dictates. Percival does not own a square yard of the earth's surface, and therefore he is at liberty to wander over it as he will. He is conscious of a curious loneliness about Judith and himself. They have no child, no near relations; it seems as if they were free from all ordinary ties and responsibilities. His vague aspirations are even less definite than of old; yet, though his life follows a wandering and uncertain track, fair flowers of kindliness, tolerance, and courtesy spring up by that wayside. Judith and he do not so much draw closer day by day, as find ever new similarity

of thought and feeling already existing between them. His heart turns to her as to a haven of peace; all his possibilities of happiness are in her hands; he rests in the full assurance that neither deed nor word of hers can ever jar upon him; in his darker moods he thinks of her as clear, still sunlight, and he has no desire apart from her. Yet, when he looks back, he doubts whether his life can hold another moment, so supreme in love and anguish, as that moment when he looked into Sissy's eyes for the last time, and knew himself forgiven.

THE END.

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